



Slow It Down by trashmovthtoziers

Category: It, Stranger Things, 2016

Genre: Adventure, Friendship

Language: English

Characters: Eddie K., Eleven/Jane H., Mike W., Richie T.

Pairings: Eddie K./Richie T., Mike W./Eleven/Jane H.

Status: In-Progress

Published: 2017-12-13 19:50:13

Updated: 2018-07-09 16:46:00

Packaged: 2019-12-12 03:43:06

Rating: T

Chapters: 10

Words: 24,176

Publisher: www.fanfiction.net

Summary: If Richie Tozier, even for just one second, thought that his whole freaking life was messed up before his world was flipped upside-down, then he would be drastically shocked when Mike Wheeler (the nerdier exact embodiment of himself) happens to be launched into his even-more-messed-up life.

1. chapter one

RICHIE TOZIER — despite his very best efforts — wasn't the greatest at dealing with the negative emotions in life. The positive emotions like happiness and zealousness and serenity weren't the problem, really, for he could keep on smiling and laughing and joking with his friends until mirthful tears streamed down his freckled cheeks. It was the emotions like sadness and solitude and vulnerability that he both physically and emotionally couldn't handle.

Richie wasn't too faint-hearted, and wouldn't ever be considered just so—he was never the first to run away if attacked. Richie, while being as badass as ever, had displayed true lionheartedness during the final confrontation with the wretched clown he and his friends called *It*. With determination coursing through his veins, he brandished his metal baseball bat before bringing it down on the skull of that stupid clown.

There lived instances, however, where he wasn't thinking reasonably enough to be courageous. Richie would become filled with the feeling of genuine terror, for the feeling slithered out of its hibernation inside of the crevices of his brain for the moments where he was at his weakest. When the more negative emotions happened to resurface, he handled his emotions rather differently.

Richie despised the feeling of vulnerability, for he couldn't comprehend the concept of someone looking into his thoughts for themselves. Whenever Richie thought back to his first face-to-face encounter with *It*, he realized that *It* had looked inside of his thoughts and emotions to discover what Richie was most scared of. He was sure and certain that *It* had been delighted when *It* found out that he wasn't afraid of any other being, but the clown itself. Pennywise needed no façade to intimidate Richie Tozier, and perhaps that terrified him more than if Pennywise had been anything else that Richie feared.

While Richie wasn't only terrified of clowns, he was terrified of werewolves and airplanes and needles and

(*his father*)

and most importantly...humiliation. While he remained reckless and impulsive, he secretly winced at the very thought of being publically embarrassed, winced at the very thought of being laughed at instead of laughed with.

And so...whenever Richie happened to be submitted to something that he couldn't emotionally handle, he ultimately turned to his defense mechanism —cursing. He had a colorful choice of swears for every situation, really, and when the pressure was just too much, he cursed like a sailor.

While swearing wasn't something uncommon in the desolate town of Derry, most people (grown men included) didn't curse like "Trashmouth Tozier". It was common knowledge that Richie Tozier cursed more than anyone else, even the adults were cognizant of the nickname that he'd received, and "Trashmouth Tozier" couldn't care less about the spreading of his plight.

But there was another explanation for the obscene language that Richie pronounced more often than not, and surprisingly, that explanation dated back to his younger years.

Richie Tozier and his father weren't close like the other Derry children and *their* fathers. Wentworth Tozier had contributed more time to working at his dentistry office than with his family. Wentworth was someone who believed that money was really something religious, believed that money was the answer to every question, and believed that money was the source of happiness for everyone on the planet. And ironically, the Tozier family wasn't the wealthiest of the lot.

Whenever Richie looked around for the other children in his neighborhood, he noticed that most of them were always spending time with *their* fathers —throwing around the football and whatnot. At only six-years-old, Richie dreamed for something similar to that with his own father. Wentworth was seldom around for dinnertime, and that confirmed that Wentworth frankly didn't have the time for Richie.

When Richie was nine-years-old he craved the attention of his father more than ever, for his classmates were playing baseball with their

fathers to practice for the coming of little league baseball. Most of his classmates blabbed on about how their fathers did *this* and *that*, played in *this* and *that*, invented *this* and *that*, but Richie was rightfully annoyed.

One afternoon in March, at nine-years-old, he became so annoyed at one of his classmates that he punched him in the nose for talking about how *his* father worked down in Hampden, Maine. Richie had been punished for punching his classmate, but that didn't matter because both of his parents were required to meet with the principal. *Both* of his parents!

Richie came to realize that if he misbehaved, his father was needed to notice his existence, and so, he started misbehaving during school and swearing loudly whenever the teachers were around. Whenever the teachers heard him swear, he was punished — asked for his parents' signature so that his parents knew that Richie was behaving "inequitably" and "unjustly". He couldn't have been more delighted to have been in trouble, for each time his father would speak with him at the kitchen table and his father was never mean about how much Richie misbehaved, he was cordial and never

(*always*)

yelled.

Richie figured that swearing had become somewhat familiar to him, and so, he cursed unintentionally whenever his plight was something that would inescapably lead to punishment (no matter how serious said punishment was) and whenever he deemed it necessary.

"Not again, ya' fucker..." Richie Tozier, fourteen-years-old, muttered to himself, clutching the window-frame while he watched as his overly-intoxicated father slammed the door of his 1984 Ford F150. Wentworth Tozier had downed far more than several drinks that night — anyone could see that.

Wentworth had stumbled through the front door piss-drunk more times than not in recent years. If his wife, Maggie Tozier, had been there, Wentworth wouldn't have stumbled into the house drunk in the first place. But Maggie wasn't there — she wouldn't be there —

because she had committed suicide by overdose when her son had been only twelve-years-old. Richie would never talk to anyone about the suicide of his mother unless he had to, for he despised being reminded of her sudden passing. Richie had been closer to his mother than he had been with his father, his mother always having had time for her son. The suicide of his mother had been unpredicted, she hadn't shown any of the signs that pointed toward suicide before her death, but she had taken her life nonetheless.

Richie Tozier missed his mother genuinely and he guessed that perhaps his father did, too, because Richie couldn't think of another reason why his father would've turned to alcohol after the passing of his wife. Richie figured that maybe Wentworth hadn't hated his family, after all. Or, maybe, Wentworth hadn't despised Maggie (he had loved her once, probably did then), but he, for sure, despised his foulmouthed son.

Richie listened as Wentworth staggered through the front door and suddenly, the intense feeling of resentment for his father bubbled dangerously inside the abyss of his stomach. When Richie was younger, he had desired the attention from his father greatly, but at that moment, he regretted the entire thing. All he had wanted then was for his father to love him, but at that moment, Richie realized that his father had one disgusting, ruthless soul.

When Richie sprinted down the wooden staircase, his surroundings were blurred with his anger. He wanted only to confront his father, for he believed that his father never deserved having someone like who Richie used to be—someone who had *tried*, and *tried*, and *tried*, for his attention.

"You're drunk again, Daddy Dearest?" asked Richie, his tone-of-voice dripping with malice. "I'm surprised you don't have another drugged teenager with you this time." He smiled exasperatingly, tilting his head to the side as if to intimate his father.

Before Richie could mentally process what was happening, his father had punched him once in the mouth and once in the stomach. Richie had tumbled toward the ground, falling to his knees. From there, he started sputtering crimson blood onto the threadbare carpet underneath him. Already, Richie wished that he hadn't provoked his

father. At that moment, he despised his unfiltered trashmouth, and he wished that he'd learned when to close his goddamned mouth.

Wentworth Tozier grabbed him forcefully by his raven-colored locks, angling Richie to where he could punch him in the cheekbone. When Richie's magnified, coke-bottle glasses slipped off of his bloodied nose and clattered onto the floor, they somehow didn't break. With his surrounding now exceptionally out of focus, he was capable of only listening and feeling while his maniac-of-a-father kicked and punched him ruthlessly.

When Wentworth eventually tossed Richie back onto the floor, he guessed that his father had completed his endeavor of abusing his own child and, surely, was about to collapse onto the ground himself in his own drunken crash, but, oh, was Richie wrong.

Richie Tozier huddled into the fetal position, whimpering softly whilst his father kicked him in the stomach for the fifth time that night. With shimmering tears trailing down his cheeks, connecting the light freckles on his face, he brought his forearms upward to potentially shield himself from the wrath of his drunk-of-a-father.

When the punching and the kicking slowed ever-so-slightly, he decisively noticed the arising opportunity.

Richie peeked through the sliver of space inbetween his head and his forearms, noticing the unfocused outline of his coke-bottle glasses sitting unfolded on the floor. If he retrieved his glasses, he could escape the bruised hands of his abusive father.

Richie, while he executed his escape, moved faster than he'd ever moved before in his entire life. He recovered his glasses from the ground, clumsily slipped them onto his nose, and started running — away and away from the horrid, tainted memories he shared with his damned father. "Get back here, you little shit!" his father screamed after his fleeing figure, beckoning furiously for him to come back, but to no avail. Richie wouldn't stop for him, not now, and not ever again.

He retreated out into the brisk, serene autumn night, sprinting through the neighborhood in the direction of which his

consciousnesses guided him. *Find Big Bill*, a voice whispered despairingly in his mind. *Or Stanley...or Eddie...or anyone! Anyone at all!*

He stumbled once — no, twice — but managed to recover his balance each time. While his vision might've been swimming in and out of the abyss, he was running further and further into the heart of Derry, Maine. Richie didn't realize it at the time, his consciousnesses being too unclear, he was unintentionally running toward the Kaspbrak house in search of Eddie Kaspbrak, who wasn't just skilled in medicine and could further aid the wounds that Richie had received but his best friend.

As Richie turned the corner on the street of which Eddie lived, his vision started darkening more than before. He stumbled once more and regained his balance, great black splotches appearing before his eyes. Before Richie realized what was happening, the black splotches flowered and, soon, everything withered into the abyss.

He fainted, almost there. *So fucking close.*

2. chapter two

MIKE WHEELER and the Wheeler family (except for poor Nancy, who was babysitting the devil-of-a-child that lived several doors down) were gathered around the neatly arranged dining table for supper, stringed beans and mashed potatoes stacked onto their plates in towers of delicious food, when the telephone rang. Mrs. Wheeler glanced up from feeding her three-year-old daughter microwaveable macaroni and cheese at the sound of the telephone, turning to her husband. Mr. Wheeler, however, decided that ignoring the telephone altogether was something that he wanted to do, pouring enough of the sweet gravy onto his mashed potatoes to feed all of the hungry children in Africa.

Karen Wheeler sighed at the whole display, "Ted, honey, could you please get the phone?" Mr. Wheeler either hadn't heard his wife correctly or hadn't cared enough to answer, now shoveling the mashed potatoes into his mouth while savoring the taste.

If looks themselves could kill, for certain, Mrs. Wheeler would've had poor, old Mr. Wheeler already inside of a velvet casket six feet underneath the earth. Mrs. Wheeler, for reasons that the children just wouldn't understand, disliked the idea in screaming for her husband's attention, so she turned toward her fourteen-year-old son, Mike. "Michael, would you please answer the telephone?"

Mike Wheeler, however, (also referred to as *Moody Mike* occasionally by his D&D-playing friends) wasn't paying the least bit of attention to his surroundings, pushing his serving of mashed potatoes around his ceramic plate. If someone were watching from outside, they would think that he looked like the spitting image of his father except that he was younger and he didn't need glasses. But, boy, if Mike Wheeler had heard such foolish thoughts leaving someone's mouth, he would frantically and hysterically dismiss anything that connected himself to his father — their connection was... nonexistent in a way.

There happened to be something, however, that contradicted the belief that he and his father were alike, for Mike couldn't have cared less about that fact that there was delicious food placed before him — he, truthfully, just wasn't that hungry. But if Mrs. Wheeler had

found out that he wasn't eating his supper, she either would've shoved the food down his throat herself or driven him straight to the emergency room to see if the doctors could find out what in the world was wrong with her son. And so, he pushed them around his plate in an attempt to make it seem like he had eaten more of his dinner.

Evidently, Mrs. Wheeler herself wouldn't *dare* chance screaming at her beloved husband, yet her own son was certainly one different story. "Michael!"

Mike Wheeler jumped when his mother's stringent calling reached his ears, questioning her without thinking, "...Huh?"

"Answer the telephone...*right...now!*"

Mike complied without another sound escaping his lips, tossing his unused napkin back onto the dining table, pushing himself out of his wooden-backed chair, padding into the kitchen, and taking the telephone off of the holder. "Wheeler residence...this is, uh, Michael speaking..." he answered in an almost complete monotone (except for where he had almost identified himself with the nickname that people informally called him (Mike)), distractingly twirling the white telephone cord around his right pointer finger

"Hello, this is Susan from Child Safety Services in Maine. Could I please speak with Mrs. Karen Wheeler?"

Child Safety Services? In Maine? Mike thought, bewildered. *Why had someone from Maine that had something to do with children and their protection called for his mother?* Millions-upon-millions of thoughts circled throughout his head, swarms of bees searching for their pollen in someplace filled without any life whatsoever. There was nothing at all available that provided any information about what the woman wanted from his mother. He wanted nothing more than to ask Susan what she'd needed, tell her that his mother wasn't available and that he would deliver the message back to his mother, but he knew how dishonest and conniving that would be and chose better of it.

There was one lengthy pause before he inwardly recovered, "Yeah, uh, h-hold on..." Mike covered the telephone speaker by holding it

against his chest, calling in the direction of the dining room, "Mom! 'S for you!"

Mrs. Wheeler lifted herself from her wooden-backed chair, handed the Strawberry Shortcake doll to her daughter to engage herself in, and walked into the kitchen. Mike Wheeler handed the telephone to his mother, who regained her façade and answered it in her faux-cheerful tone-of-voice. Mike hadn't wanted to move from beside the telephone, listening closely to attempt to overhear whatever Susan from Child Safety Services wanted. Karen Wheeler, however, didn't want her meddlesome teenage son listening in on her conversation, shooing him away with an imploring look. Mike complied since he couldn't refuse to follow his mother's orders, slumping against the wall beside the staircase, hoping to discreetly overhear the conversation his mother was having with Susan from Maine. While he couldn't catch whatever Susan was saying, he could definitely listen to his mother reacting.

"Oh..." mumbled Mrs. Wheeler into the telephone, her voice wavering uncharacteristically. What his mother had answered had grasped Mike's attention, making him anxious as he listened for his mother to say something else. He peered from around the corner, watching as his mother twirled the white telephone cord inbetween her manicured fingers. Mike swallowed, for he understood that something was wrong. Something was definitely wrong.

Karen shifted from foot-to-foot before she murmured, "I-I see..." There was one antagonizing pause before she muttered another, "I see..." Mrs. Wheeler dragged a wicker chair out from the breakfast table and dropped herself into it, still holding the beige telephone against her ear. "Yes, I do..." With nervous movements, she seized the notepad and pen from the counter and wrote something down. "I understand..." Another pause. "Yes...M-Michael..." Mike Wheeler was surprised that he hadn't gripped the wall tight enough to break a hole into it. He happened to be becoming more nervous as the seconds ticked on. "Of course...Thank you...Goodbye," she finished, placing the telephone back onto the holder.

Mike had noticed almost immediately how her shoulders had shaken once — twice — she was sobbing. Mrs. Wheeler, unbeknownst to Mike Wheeler, was sobbing because of what Richie Tozier (*her* son,

her boy, the one that *she* birthed) had just gone through — being beaten by his father. Karen had been informed that Richie had half-consciously divulged to the nurses of the hospital that he'd been rushed to that his father had been on the one that had beaten him bloody. At first, the sobs that escaped her mouth were quiet and almost nonexistent, but eventually, she was blatantly wailing to the volume where her husband (who listened like an uneasy squirrel) had actually heard her. Ted Wheeler placed his spoonful of mashed potatoes back onto his plate, lifted himself from his own wooden-backed chair, and walked into the kitchen in order to check on his wife. Mike, still peering from behind the wall beside the staircase, watched shocked as his father crouched beside his mother, murmuring soothing words to her while she continued sobbing. It caused Mike to realize that he had never seen his father show such affection to anyone and that perhaps his father and his mother loved each other, after all.

Mike swallowed again, for he understood that something was wrong. Something was definitely wrong. *Had someone died?* Mike believed that that answer was the most reasonable considering the situation, for his mother was weeping like someone that she loved sincerely was suddenly gone. Despite being merely fourteen, he could empathize with his mother's apparent situation, for he had lost someone he had loved sincerely too.

Karen Wheeler had sobbed, and sobbed, and sobbed for what seemed like hours, but was only several long-drawn minutes. Only when Mike prayed to heavens above that his mother would finish crying (he hated the sound almost as much as he hated the Demogorgon) did she eventually recompose herself. Mr. and Mrs. Wheeler retreated back into the dining room, where Holly hadn't moved from her spot in her wooden-backed chair, fiddling with the Strawberry Shortcake doll and babbling incoherently.

"Michael!"

Mr. Wheeler had summoned him from the dining room, realizing that he hadn't returned to the dining room after he had handed the telephone to his mother but somewhere else in the house. Mike Wheeler released his iron-like clutch he'd gripped onto the wall beside the staircase, then began shuffling back into the room with his

parents. Without opening his mouth once, he dropped himself into his own wooden-backed chair, grabbed his spoon from his plate, and shoved the first bite of mashed potatoes (though, they were just about ice-cold) that he'd consumed that night into his mouth in an attempt to make it appear like he hadn't been watching the whole Susan-from-Maine-calling-and-Mom-crying fiasco. Mrs. Wheeler was sitting beside Mr. Wheeler and across from her teenage son, her eyes, however, were trained on her conjoined hands which rested on her knees.

"Michael"—his mother lifted her glance, connecting eyes with an anxious Mike—"we have something to tell you," his mother explained. "But you have to promise"—Mike flinched, for the word 'promise' really *was* touchy—"not to be upset with us when we tell you, alright?" When Mike nodded, Karen continued, "Well... you see..."

"I'm home!" When his older sister, Nancy Wheeler, opened the front door, interrupting the serious conversation that he and his parents were about to have, Mike Wheeler almost screamed in genuine frustration. When she strolled into the dining room, he noticed that his parents looked almost like they had forgotten that she'd existed.

"Oh, uh, N-Nancy!" exclaimed Mrs. Wheeler, trying to conceal her own surprise at seeing her daughter. Nancy herself had noticed the apparent surprise in her mother's exclamation, shifting her body-weight inbetween her legs. "I-I wasn't expecting you so early!" Karen continued.

"The parents got home early, 'dunno why..." Nancy explained, her scrutinizing glance traveling inbetween each of the Wheelers before landing on her younger brother. "What's going on?" she questioned him. Nancy Wheeler had always been the perceptive one, having noticed the bloodshot eyes her mother had, the look of frustration that fit Mike like a glove, and how fright had shown in Mr. Wheeler's brown eyes.

Mike ignored the question altogether, having realized that he understood what was going on just about as well as his older sister did.

Mrs. and Mr. Wheeler exchanged one long glance that neither Nancy

nor Mike could identify the meaning of, before looking back toward each of their children, "Nancy, why don't you take a seat beside your brother?" It wasn't anything close to a question, but Nancy had nodded and dropped herself in the wooden-backed chair to the right of her brother, who still looked piqued because she had delayed the explanation for everything that had just happened.

Mrs. Wheeler stared straight at her teenage son, this time. "Mike, sweetheart, we have something to confess... You see, when you were born"—Mike hoped and pleaded to the heavens above that this wasn't his birds and the bees talk, but then he realized that Holly was there and his parents wouldn't dare giving that talk to her this early in her life—"I didn't just give birth to you... I had another child. His name: Richard. Y-You have an identical twin brother, Mike, and I'm so sorry that your father and I hadn't told you until now. You see, we were just trying to—"

"To fool me?" Mike Wheeler was becoming angrier and angrier by the second. For the smallest of seconds, Nancy imagined her brother with steam swirling out of his nostrils. "To deceive me? B-Because I'm just a *fucking* child who knows nothing?!"

"Language!" reprimanded his father, choosing formality over seriousness.

"You shouldn't be angry at me for my language! I should be angry at you for keeping that big of a secret from me for-for my *entire life!*"

"Mom!" Nancy sounded shocked, outraged, and disappointed all at the same time, locking eyes with her mother. "You-You tricked me when I was four years old! You said that you were having one child. I knew nothing about you having another! You could've said something then, but you didn't!"

"Nanc—"

"No, mom! Why the hell have you never told me and Mike?"

"Language!" her father repeated.

"Ah, shut up!" Mike, sucking up all his doubts, defended his older

sister for the first time to his parents, contradicting his father by speaking against him.

Everything was quiet for several seconds, but then, the screaming started up once more. Holly had stopped playing happily with her Strawberry Shortcake doll, her blue eyes jumping frantically inbetween whoever was speaking (or yelling, rather).

"You should've said something! Anything!"

"We had our reasons not to tell you!"

"Yeah? Bullshit!"

"Language!"

"EVERYONE BE QUIET!" Mrs. Wheeler was one-hundred percent done with the family's antics. "Nancy! Mike! I want both of you to close your mouths, and if I see one of you open them then both of you are grounded for the next six months! Have I made myself clear?" Mike realized that he had never before seen his mother that angry. When he glanced at his sister, he noticed that she was nodding her head. *Why had she nodded her head? This is outrageous! I can't believe that this is happening!* Mike nodded, anyway.

"If you two would've allowed me to explain everything then we wouldn't have fallen into that... debacle," his mother was speaking sternly, so he knew that whatever story his mother was telling would eventually lead to what caused her crying earlier. Mike didn't speak, just listened.

"I never told you that I once had a sister. Maybe Nancy remembers her, but I don't think she does. My sister and I: we weren't twins, she was seven years younger than I was. About the time that she and husband found out that they couldn't have children, I found out that I was pregnant with twins. I noticed how careful and kind she was when she babysat Nancy, and I realized that giving her my child would make her so happy. I never told Nancy that I had two children in my stomach because I knew that Maggie and her husband were moving straight to Maine once they got Richie, someplace away from Hawkins because I knew that they despised this town. Nancy, when

Mike and Richard were born, we never showed Richard to you because we didn't want you to be attached to him. I knew that Maggie wouldn't come back, and I knew that I couldn't leave Hawkins because of how Ted had worked. You wouldn't have seen him even if you knew about him. Maggie and her husband took Richard to Maine, but after that, I hadn't heard anything from my sister. I thought about Richard all of the time, and about how much I regretted giving him up, but I knew that Maggie would treat him well enough.

"Everything changed two years ago, I got a call that said that she had committed suicide. I was grieving horribly because she might not have been around, and we might not have communicated that much, but she was still my sister. Richard, I-I guess, was compelled to live with his father. I-I didn't know much about him, but I knew that he was as work-oriented as anyone could ever be. I missed Richard, and I wished that I hadn't given him to my sister. But today, I got a call from Child Safety Services in Maine, and they said that Richard had been found unconscious in the middle of a street, bloody and bruised and with a severe concussion and several broken ribs. When the ambulance found him, he was nearly d-dead. When he finally w-woke up, they found out that his f-father was the one who had beaten him. I-I feel so bad for all of this. I w-wish that I hadn't done this to him. The woman from Child Safety Services said that I c-could reclaim him and take him back... s-so I did. He's coming back to Hawkins, Mike."

Mike Wheeler was sure and certain that his brain was about to explode with all of the new information that he just received. *His brother (his identical twin brother, at that)* was coming back to Hawkins to finally live with him and his family? *It was too good to be true!*

3. chapter three

RICHIE TOZIER, without his tremendous-and-surely-medically-prescribed glasses, was probably blinder than Stevie Wonder himself. He doesn't know why he remembers it, exactly, but he remembers little five-year-old Eddie Kaspbrak pleading for little five-year-old Richie Tozier to tell his mother about his poor eyesight, for he knew the second that Richie hadn't noticed the bright, white speckles on the exotic bird that little five-year-old Stanley Uris had pointed out to them and little five-year-old Bill Denbrough that his friend needed glasses.

While Richie might've been without glasses and his vision might've been fuzzier than Fozzie Bear, he noticed almost the second after he opened his eyes that Eddie Kaspbrak, in the flesh, was hovering over him with what looked to be a permanent crinkle in his eyebrows. Eddie didn't speak, he only slipped the coke-bottle glasses rightfully back onto Richie's nose.

When his glasses were placed over his eyes, for Richie, everything fell properly back into focus. Stanley Uris, he recognized, was standing alongside Eddie with his arms crisscrossed over his chest, yet an apparent look of concern danced across his expression. Mike Hanlon and Bill Denbrough were standing at the opposite side of the generic hospital bed, side-by-side with almost identical looks of sympathy played across their features. Beverly Marsh standing by the other side of Eddie, and Richie had noticed that the smallest bit of ferocity was patent in her expression. Ben Hanscom was perched in one of the hospital chairs that the hospital had provided, the chair positioned beside the hospital bed that Richie occupied, the brilliant look of kindness that almost always took place in his expression the most visible at that moment in time.

Eddie Kaspbrak, however, wasn't flagrantly showing his emotions like the others were. There were more emotions flickering behind his brilliant eyes than what Richie could correctly decipher the meaning of. Eddie has sadness displayed behind those irises, yet at the same time there was passion and excitement and joy, but hurt and commiseration rested there as well. He looked like he was frayed

around the edges — like if one of his threads were pulled, he would unravel completely. And Richie had, because of this, been rendered speechless for the first time in what seemed like years.

Jesus, he hoped someone had already informed his friends about what happened to him and that his father was the one ultimately responsible for it all. He didn't like whatsoever the thought of having to explain to his friends that his father had drunkenly beaten him to a pulp, for he had already half-consciously fessed to the nurses that found him in the street that somber reality. He felt certain that he already knew how his friends would react to that information. Bill and Eddie and Stanley wouldn't be at all surprised, they had known Richie since they were young and would've had to have heard at least one of his adolescent ramblings about how his father paid little-to-no heed of his existence. He figured that Mike Hanlon and Ben and Bev, however, would be surprised with the revealing of Richie's situation, for he hadn't spoken wrongly of his father since they were corraled into the group, and in fact, he seldom spoke of his father at all. He thought that perhaps Eddie and Bill and Stanley could piece together how the suicide of his mother played part in this whole mess, but he knew not if Mike Hanlon or Bev were aware of her suicide in the first place, and since Ben had only recently moved to Derry, he probably had no idea that the suicide happened at all.

Again, he sure hoped someone had already talked to his friends about what happened. It was the silence that had descended onto the group of friends like a sodden blanket, suffocated them whilst relentlessly keeping hold, that scared him into believing that perhaps he would have to inform his friends himself, after all.

"Rich..." whispered Beverly, taking the smallest of steps closer to her bedridden friend. "You scared us senseless, really."

"Wuh-We wouldn't have known what to do if we'd lost you." Bill smiled, and while it might've been thin-lipped, it was genuine.

"You're the heart of this group, 'Chee," admitted Bev, her cerulean eyes sparkling in the sunshine that was filtered through the aluminum blinds of the hospital room. If the whole situation was in better condition, Richie would've protested and he would've protested with passion. Bullshit, Bev! You know good and well that Big Bill

happens to be the heart of us Losers. The most loserish loser of us all! But rather than declaring such objection, he produced the smallest of smiles for his beloved friends.

"Jesus, enough with this sappy-ass shit..." replied Richie, though his irritated throat drained his reply of much character, provoking his voice to sound scratchy and underused. "I just wanna know a few things, all right?"

Bill nodded — and when Big Bill nodded his head, everyone else was nodding their heads along with him. Bill would always be the unofficial leader of the Losers Club, though no one would really mention it aloud since they knew Bill would modestly dismiss any connection to such important position. Nevertheless, everyone knew Bill Denbrough was a natural-born leader.

And while he always seemed to have the most helpful insights, he stuttered his way through it.

Richie was sure and certain that Bill Denbrough was most definitely the true heart of the Losers Club, not himself. *That notion is almost laughable!* he thought. Hell, Richie made himself out to be the foul-mouthed dweeb of the Losers — the one with big-ass glasses, skinny arms, even skinner legs, and teeth bigger than Texas. He even thought of himself more annoying and pesky than mosquitoes during the summertime, always there to pester someone relentlessly. Richie wasn't someone nearly as important as Big Bill, right?

"Do you, uh, know about what happened?"

It seemed that the second those words had registered in his friends' brains, they promptly redirected their eyes toward their sneakers rather than toward Richie. However, it was Eddie who regained his composure first, glancing upward hesitantly to meet the scrutinizing look that creased Richie's eyebrows.

"Yeah, uh, we know..." responded Eddie, taking his sweet time thinking of an acceptable answer.

"Good."

"R-Rich, are you-"

"M fine, Eds."

"Don't call me Eds."

"What was that, Eds?"

"Aw, shut up! You know I hate it when you mess with me like that!"

It happened then. Eddie Kaspbrak had broken, throwing his arms around Richie's neck and hugging him both tightly and genuinely. Eddie was crying.

Jesus, Eddie was so, so exhausted. After Mike Hanlon had called at around 11 o'clock during the previous night to tell him that Richie had been found in the middle of the street, unconscious, and had been wheeled away to the hospital, he had barged into his mother's bedroom and shaken her until she awoke — begging and pleading that she drive him to the hospital to see Richie since the hospital was inconveniently located all the way across town, too far for his Raleigh bicycle. Sonia Kaspbrak, eventually, relented after seeing how upset he was, though she disliked the who that he wished to see in the first place. She supposed that perhaps Richie meant something important to Eddie, and decided better than fighting with him since driving him to the hospital — one of the safest places on the planet, in her opinion — wasn't very harmful. But when Eddie had finally arrived at the sterile hospital, the doctors had forbidden him and other Losers from seeing Richie since he was still unconscious. Twelve-hours, they waited. Everyone had fallen asleep at least once for at least an hour, except for Eddie, who was far too worried about his best friend than to give in to exhaustion. After the twelve-hour mark, thankfully, the nurses finally got tired of the incessant jitters they brought to the waiting room and forced them into Richie's hospital room with explicit directions to not disturb him.

Sure, Eddie was delirious with pure and unsullied exhaustion (hence, the crying), but all Eddie really wanted was for Richie to be okay. And Richie, though without much strength considering his condition, was hugging his best friend back, and he guessed that crying was contagious because, soon enough, there were shimmering tears

streaming down his own freckled cheeks.

The Losers' overlooked the exchange with small smiles gracing their lips, tears of their own threatening to escape as well. Bill Denbrough felt something click somewhere deep inside of him, choosing for him that, yes, this moment was meant for the other Losers, too. Bill stepped forward and wrapped his long, slender arms around Richie and Eddie. Eventually, the other Losers followed what Bill had decided, wrapping their arms around Richie, Eddie, and the rest of the Losers in a meaningful group embrace. The Lucky 7, together again.

After staying in the hug for several minutes, they finally released each other — each of the Losers coming out of the embrace with tears gleaming in the corners of their eyes. Eddie Kasprak, though he initiated the embrace, lagged in it longer than the others, finally releasing Richie the second that all of his tears had dried.

Richie forced himself to appear rather stoic-faced, his dark-chocolate eyes dancing between each of his friends. "How long have you guys been here? How long was I out?"

Mike Hanlon replied, cheeks rather flushed, "About twelve hours, maybe thirteen..."

"Are you serious?!"

"Yeah..."

Richie was shocked. He had been unconscious for almost thirteen hours?!

"Did anything interesting happen? Yanno, like... with my f-father? Do you know what happened to 'im? Do you know who found me? The last thing I remember is passing out in the middle of the street. I-I think I was going to Eddie's house but I don't remember exactly. It was just that-"

"Richie!" Stanley cut off his incessant ramblings. "Slow down, please. Just breathe."

"How could I possibly breathe when I need to know about twelve

hours of shit that I missed and I need to know it now before I give myself an early death!"

"Wuh-We'll explain if you close your mouth for just one second," countered Bill, stringent, and Richie couldn't help but comply with the unusual sternness that Bill displayed. Beverly had noticed the strict demeanor that Bill radiated, glancing at him with the slightest bit of nervousness. He seldom acted like this and she knew it. Bill was fixed on Richie, waiting for him to respond. Instead of opening his mouth like Bill had forbidden him from doing, he simply nodded.

"Good," said Bill, and just like that, his stern demeanor was gone and replaced with something more similar to earnestness. Bill heaved a deep breath, collected his thoughts, and spoke them. "Oh-Okay... so this group of nurses found you in the middle of the s-street on their way home from the night shift. They called the a-ambulance and partially treated you before it even came. In the ambulance, from what I-I-I'm told, you woke up and started half-consciously talking to the nurses, tuh-telling them that your father was the o-one who hurt you. You a-also i-instructed them to tell someone to call Mike Hanlon and tell him what happened. They listened, suh-s-surprisingly, and each of us got c-calls from Mike at around eh-eleven o'clock last night. We all came as fast as we could, but the nuh-nurses wouldn't let us see you because you were still unconscious and they still had to further tuh-t-treat you. Wuh-We waited in the waiting room f-for forever, pestering the on-call nurses for anything about what happened to you. Eventually, one of the on-call nurses called one of the nurses that found you and she came and tuh-told us what you said in the ambulance about your fuh-f-father. She told us that one of the other nurses had gone to the police and reported yuh-your father. A-As far as we knew, yuh-your dad was arrested for child a-ab-abuse. Anyway, t-th-they let us into your room after we started begging the on-call nurse who wuh-watched the waiting room and we just waited for you to wake up a-and, I-I guess, here we are."

Lord, it was far too much to process. My father had *been arrested for child abuse*? Richie figured that his entire life had been changed in twelve hours, maybe even thirteen. *Where could I stay now*? Richie swallowed, for he understood that something was wrong. Something was definitely wrong. *Who am I going to stay with*? Mrs. Kaspbrak hates

me, so staying with Eddie was out of the picture. Maybe I could stay at Ben's or Bill's or Mike's, but I don't know if they'd let me. Most of the adults in Derry think that I'm a good-for-nothing trashmouth, anyway. Maybe if I don't tell anyone, I could stay at my house until the city finds out that I'm not paying rent. But what do I do after that?

"Well, fuck..." was what he decided to say about that.

4. chapter four

RICHIE TOZIER had been awoken for the second time in the course of days he spent inside the hospital by the most piercing and throbbing headache that he'd ever experienced before in his whole life. Groaning, he massaged his forehead with his bandaged hands, hoping that the headache would cease, but to no avail. "Shit..." he murmured, the word bubbling somewhere in the back of his hoarse throat. He retrieved his glasses from the swinging bedside table that rested on wheels and slipped them back onto his face. When his eyesight had finally returned, he almost screamed.

"Poor, Richard. How're you feeling, honey?" came the unrecognizable voice of the woman that scared him into almost screaming, her blonde hair pulled back into a too-tight ponytail that defined her hollow cheekbones. Considering her blonde hair was pulled back so tight, he immediately noticed the uncanny similarity she shared with Betty Cooper from the Archie Comics that he and Eddie Kaspbrak flipped through on occasion, though the woman looked older and her cheekbones were really unusually high.

Richie chuckled, "Truthfully, I've been better..." He attempted to prop himself up on the stack of pillows underneath his still-throbbing head, but even the slightest movement showed just how sore he'd become since his encounter with his friends the previous day. "Who're you?" he asked through gritted teeth.

Betty Cooper look-a-like positioned herself straighter, much more refined. "Well, my name is Susan and I work for Child Safety Services." Richie cursed, letting himself close his eyes for the smallest of seconds. He was going to be thrown into an orphanage and he knew it!

"Y-You're gonna take me away from here, aren't ya? You're gonna throw poor Trashmouth into an orphanage?" When he opened his eyes once again, he realized that Susan from Child Safety Services was no longer smiling, but grimacing.

"'Throwing' you into some orphanage sounds highly unnecessary," she said, folding herself rather elegantly into the hospital chair that Ben

Hanscom had occupied the day before. "There's been someone who has offered to take you in, Richard, and I am sure you'll be pleased with who it is." *Please be Eddie. Please be Bill. Please be Stan. Please be Ben. Please be Mike. Please be Bev.*

"Well, then... w-who is it?"

"Your mother, sweetie."

"My *mother* is dead."

"Your real mother isn't."

"WHAT?!"

Susan looked alarmed, "You know you're adopted, right?"

"WHAT?!"

If Susan had looked alarmed before she asked him if he knew that he was adopted, then she looked even more alarmed now. *How could've his parents not told him that he had been adopted? What kind of family was this kid raised in? Had no one cared enough to tell him that he'd been adopted?* she thought. "W-Well... Jesus... you're adopted."

"What the *fuck*, lady? No, I'm not! I don't have any parents now since my dad got thrown into jail!"

"Jesus, kid, I thought someone had already told you this! I'm not the right person to tell you about it, anyway. You'll have to wait to find out the reason why since... I have not a clue, but I *do* know that your real mother offered to take care of you. Her name is Karen and she and her husband have three other children — Holly, Nancy, and M-Michael. Michael, you see, he... he's your twin brother, but still, I know nothing about the drama between your family and whatever so I have no idea why you were separated from him."

"I-I have a *twin brother*?"

"An *identical* twin brother," she pointed out.

"WHAT?!"

"I know, I know, it's a whole lot to process," Susan continued while smiling, not noticing the distress that Richie was plagued with. *An identical twin brother?!* "But they want you to live with them in Hawkins, Indiana..."

"INDIANA?! W-What? No! I'm not moving to Indiana!"

"Richard, they asked for you and they're your family."

"I DON'T GIVE A SHIT IF THEY'RE ROYALTY! I'M NOT LEAVING MAINE AND MY *FRIENDS*!"

"Kid, you've gotta understand that these people are your family!-"

"MY FRIENDS ARE THE CLOSEST THING I HAVE TO FAMILY! THEY DIDN'T LEAVE ME!"

Susan from Child Safety Services sighed, her resemblance between Betty Cooper more apparent than before. "They're gonna fight for you, kid, and they're gonna win. Don't even think about running away to your friends because... your family really wants to see you. Karen, your mother, sounded absolutely broke up when I told her about what happened to you. They care about you, kid, and if you don't wanna live with them forever, you can at least visit them and see them because you might not get that chance another time in your life."

As much as he didn't want to admit it, she was right! Richie needed to go to whatever-the-name-of-their-town-was, Indiana and see his family because he guessed that if they wanted custody of him, then they probably wanted to see him again. Damn, he wanted to see that so-called identical twin brother of his. It was interesting having a whole family half-way across the country that wants to reconnect, but he still can't believe that his mother — his adoptive mother — hadn't told him about his other family. *Was there really drama between his adoptive mother and his birth mother just like Susan had guessed?* He realized that he hadn't hated Susan like he thought he would, for she was considerate of his feelings.

Richie grinned, the light dimples in his freckled cheeks the most prominent. "Thank you, Susan."

"You're welcome, kid..." Susan from Child Safety Services smiled back, lifting herself out of the hospital chair and walking straight out of the hospital room. That was the last time he'd ever see Susan, and he wished that he would've thanked her for helping him reconnect with his family.

EDDIE KASPBRAK thought that he was exceptionally stupid, in this case. *How could he* not have noticed how horrible Mr. Tozier was to Richie? God, he sure felt like a right shitty friend for not having noticed it before. Sure, he noticed how Richie had been totally broken up after what had happened to his mother, but Eddie never once noticed that Richie's father had been, for lack of better term... abusive.

It only occurred to him when he thought deeply about it, but all of the rare situations where Richie was acting uncharacteristically unlike himself flooding into his mind. Almost every time Richie had hesitated one second too long when a joke was needed, or when he was unusually and strangely untalkative, oh, it all pointed right back to his own fucking father. Eddie guessed that whenever Richie hadn't acted like himself, exactly, he was dealing with whatever shit his father had done this time.

Richie, all of his friends knew, was pretty damn tough when it came down to his emotions. He threw on this façade (one of which he was awfully good at keeping up) of swear words, cigarette burns, and mussed up raven-colored hair to shield himself from anything and everything that connected him to his emotions — Eddie knew.

Eddie, though the memories were distant, remembered deep down that Richie had once cared oh-so-deeply for his father. Eddie knew it because Richie had once been his first friend. Eddie remembered Richie (Lord, he remembered the clothes that Richie wore on that day — khaki shorts and muddy, green trainers with that blue-green tee shirt that had an orange cassette tape on the front) and how Richie had been the only one in the entire Kindergarten class to notice him sitting on the wooden bench at recess on the first day, alone thanks to Mrs. Kaspbrak and her profuse warnings about the germs that children carried and spread throughout the playground and Eddie couldn't help but comply with his over-bearing mother. Richie had plopped down beside him, dirt spread across his freckled cheek, and

asked him first about the fanny pack around his waist and second about the inhaler clutched in his hand. Eddie stuttered much like Big Bill when he answered the questions that Richie had asked him, but Richie hadn't commented on how choked up Eddie had appeared. Instead of questioning any further, Richie had extended his dirt-encrusted hand to Eddie and introduced himself. Eddie, being too surprised to have finally met someone at school, had shaken the dirty hand that Richie had offered and introduced himself right on back. Richie was awfully quick to comment on his name, playfully, calling him 'Eddie Spaghetti' when he had thrown his arms around Eddie's shoulder and proclaimed them the best of friends.

Eddie Kaspbrak shoved open the narrow, glass door at the front of the Corner Street Pharmacy, the exterior of the pharmacy still having the bright red-orange Camel cigarette advertisements scattered along the windows. Almost the second after he stepped into the pharmacy, he was overwhelmed with a mixture of smells, only being able to recognize the faint smell of the vanilla cigarettes that Richie almost always smelled of and the more prominent combination of powdered pills and talcum baby powder. *PHARMACY*, the fluorescent, blue neon-sign across from the entrance read.

Eddie, feeling an uneasiness bubble inside of his stomach, weaved through the long aisles until he turned down the one that was labeled '*GREETING CARDS*'. Stacked in staircase-like wooden displays, hundreds upon hundreds of greeting cards that served for all different purposes stared back at him almost tauntingly. *It was like the greeting cards somehow wanted him to feel nervous!* Certain sections of the displays were labeled distinctly with their purpose: '*BIRTHDAY*' one read, while another read '*SYMPATHY*'. Eddie found the '*GET WELL SOON*' section and approached it, wringing his hands apprehensively.

Eddie grabbed one of the '*GET WELL SOON*' cards at random and flipped through it, deciding better of it and placing it back onto the shelf.

After flipping through several extra-cheesy cards, he eventually found one that he knew Richie wouldn't absolutely detest. Xeroxed across the front was an elegant field of flowers, all of the colors of the rainbow and all different kinds of flowers conjoined into one breathtaking picture. Above the field of flowers, sprawled over the

cerulean sky, were the words: *'REST AND RECOVER THE STRENGTH YOU NEED'*.

Inside of the card was the same field of flowers but, this time, they were at a different angle. In the middle of the field was a woman that was wearing an overly-large floppy, yellow hat, brandishing a polka-dotted, purple parasol across her shoulder. Her hair was a bright, striking auburn, so much so that it almost looked like it was orange to begin with. Though she wasn't facing her photographer, she was facing the setting sun from across the golden horizon of which filtered beams of glowing sunlight onto her surroundings. Eddie guessed that even though she wasn't facing the photographer, and in turn, him, she was probably smiling from ear-to-ear because surely if Eddie had been there, he would definitely be smiling, too. Above the woman with the parasol were the words in the same loopy cursive: *'I AM THINKING OF YOU, WISHING ENDLESSLY THAT YOU WILL RECOVER SOON'*. He couldn't explain it, but the picture was somehow enticing — somehow just calling for Eddie to *buy* it and to give it to Richie.

Eddie grabbed the yellow envelope from behind the collection of greeting cards, beaming as he did so. Without nearly as much nervousness as before, he walked toward the register and handed over enough of his birthday money to pay for the greeting card and a packet of Wrigley's Juicy Fruit Gum that he had fished from the display on the countertop of the register. Satisfied with his purchase, Eddie tucked the package of chewing gum into his pocket and clutched the envelope and the greeting card as he walked home.

5. chapter five

RICHIE TOZIER and the other members of the Losers' Club watched dejectedly as the massive, boxy blue-green train pulled into the station, the train screeching against the steel railroad tracks as the conductor forced down the heavy brake. The Losers watched the train eventually come to a standstill, sadness already pulling at their heartstrings because they knew that Richie Tozier was leaving them.

Trashmouth Tozier, through and through, was a blatant Loser — and Losers always looked out for each other. His friends, being Losers themselves, wanted always the best for him, so they urged and urged him to go to Indiana to meet with his family. Now, they waited with him at the train terminal. It wasn't until they realized that Richie was carrying an actual suitcase did the feelings completely kick in. They, of course, would immediately curse themselves for being so selfish, but they didn't want him to leave. Richie really was the heart of the Losers' Club — everyone knew it except for himself.

"Well..." stated Richie, the only physical reminder of what happened with his father being the faded, purple bruise on his right cheek. Still, he acted as if nothing had happened. "I was hoping that Mrs. K was gonna come and kiss me goodbye, but I guess that we already said goodbye last night when we made lo-"

"Beep beep, Richie..." scolded Eddie while he glanced at the aforementioned, the slightest crinkle apparent in his eyebrows. "You never know the right times to say things, don't ya?"

"Aw, Spaghetti! I wasn't expecting you to be so jealous of what your mom and I have! I mean, really, it's the closest thing to love that I've ever experienced! It's passionate and it's tempestuous and it's plain sexu-"

"Shut the fuck up, Richie!" Eddie was becoming more and more pissed off as the seconds went by. His cheeks were crimson, nearly enough for Stanley to be surprised that steam wasn't swirling out of his nostrils. "Just stop talking!"

"Sometimes I forget that you're so smart, Richie..." said Beverly, her

voice an earthquake — shaking violently, and eventually breaking altogether. "You're using words like... tem... t-tem..." In her throat was a viscid lump, one that she couldn't swallow and ultimately restricted her voice from working. If one looked close enough, they would see the shimmering tears that brimmed her cerulean eyes.

"Tempestuous?" Ben had finished for Beverly. He was standing beside Mike Hanlon with his hands stuffed into the pockets of his sweatshirt, knawing and picking at his chapped lips with his teeth.

"Yeah... tempestuous," whispered Bev, smiling softly. It was obvious that she was trying to avoid the boys' eyes by acting as if her thrifted, white Keds were the most interesting things at the moment.

Mike Hanlon observed several people board the engine, one of them that didn't look over sixteen carrying a backpack and another that looked middle-aged carrying a briefcase. "And you *stay* smart, Richie. Don't go off doing anything stupid."

"I th-think that's an imp-p-possible thing f-for you to ask of him," claimed Bill.

"We can only hope to God he'll manage," agreed Ben.

"Hey! I'll be fine, alright? I've got someone else to look after me!"

"Speaking of someone else, I hope your brother won't murder you for being so downright stupid." Stanley watched several birds circle the platform, wishing that he brought his bird journal.

Mike Hanlon insisted, "Well, it's gotta be his common sense. Other than that '*small*' thing, he's basically a child prodigy."

When Richie opened his mouth to protest such thing, he closed it back again when the whistle signaling that the train was leaving soon sounded. It was only then that the Losers remembered that they couldn't bicker with him to their heart's content anymore, for he was leaving and couldn't provoke another argument.

Beverly Marsh, who still had tears brimming her cerulean eyes, turned toward Richie and proclaimed, "You call me when you get there, alright? *Don't forget!*"

He nodded, "I will, you know. Don't get your fucking panties in a twist!" Beverly flicked him on the forearm in response. Then, shockingly, the group of friends fell into silence for the first time in forever — not even Richie opened his mouth. It was like they were suddenly rendered speechless, and no acceptable words at all were coming to their brains. No one, at all, knew how they were going to say goodbye to someone as important as Richie. They all knew that whatever words were spoken in parting would be remembered for a while.

While no one knew the correct words, they knew the correct actions. Beverly wrapped her slender, freckled arms around Richie, who welcomed the embrace. When Beverly let out an embarrassing sob, she didn't care because she couldn't believe that Richie was actually leaving. Eddie then joined the embrace, tears running down his cheeks and surely soaking the clothes that his friends wore. Bill hugged them from behind, struck with emotion though there weren't any shimmering tears in his eyes. Mike Hanlon soon joined the embrace, too, being the strongest of them all and, in turn, tightening the hug considerably. Ben joined them next, several tears streaming down his round and reddened cheeks. Stanley was the last Loser that hugged him, throwing his OCD out of the window by wrinkling his collard shirt during the moment with his friends.

What happened next, though, surprised everyone considering that it seldom occurred — the one who was infamous for his façade broke out of character, allowing an uncharacteristic sob to escape from his chapped lips. Richie Tozier himself was crying the loudest out of all of the Losers, his cries being the most powerful and the most meaningful.

It wasn't something that happened often, making the whole situation more surprising to each of the Losers. There was only one occurrence where Richie had cried in the presence of them all (minus Big Bill) and that was somewhere far inside of the sewers after *It* in the form of the painted woman had pierced into Stanley's face. Richie had knelt at Stanley's feet and cried for him, promising that he would never leave him alone. It was ironic, really, considering that Richie was leaving them all for his family in Indiana. The fact that Richie was leaving them and the fact that it connected to *It* made Richie

start crying even harder.

WOOOO!

The metal whistle of the engine was pulled once more, signaling that the train would leave in only several minutes and that the remaining passengers should board. His friends released him then, for they didn't need him missing the train. Richie took his glasses off of his face and rubbed furiously at his reddened eyes before slipping them back on. He pulled his ticket from the pocket of his jeans, straightened it out, and clutched it in his hand. Richie looked back toward his friends once more, seeing that they stood in an exact line, watching with saddened eyes as he collected his things. Richie, swallowing all of the fucking doubts and putting his complete and utter trust into his family that he knew close to nothing about that lived half-way across the country, walked into his brand-new life.

"WAIT, RICHIE!"

Eddie Kaspbrak had sprinted toward him right before he boarded the engine, stopping him from continuing into his brand-new life for the moment. It was the faint freckles on his cheeks and nose of which were illuminated by the sunlight rays from above and the wide-eyed expression on his face as he looked upward at Richie that made Richie think, *of-fucking-God*, that Eddie Kaspbrak was planning on kissing him goodbye.

But he didn't.

Instead of doing such things, he reached into the pocket of way-too-short shorts, pulled out a packet of *Wrigley's Juicy Fruit Gum*, and grabbed the hands of his first friend — his *best* friend. Richie couldn't help but think of cheesy-ass commercial jingle for Juicy Fruit that he had sometimes seen on the television.

"Remember me, Richie..." pleaded Eddie, glimpsing up at Richie through his eyelashes as he placed the packet of chewing gum into Richie's hand. "Remember."

And Richie hoped to God that he would never, ever forget Eddie Kaspbrak. "I won't forget you, Spaghetti Man. I *promise* you that I

won't.

"B-But what if you do?"

"I *won't* and I know it. I'll call you whenever I can. And I'll write letters to you, too, but you know that my handwriting is actual shit."

Eddie smiled, "Yeah, it is."

Sounding for the final time was the whistle of the engine, warning the remaining passengers that there were only thirty seconds left before the train would begin rolling down the railroad tracks toward its destination.

"You should get going, Rich. I don't wanna see you jumping onto the train like from one of the shitty Western movies that Ben loves."

"He loves them almost as much as he loves Beverly," Richie laughed, pushing back the lock of raven-colored hair that had fallen into his eyes. "See ya soon, Eds!"

"Don't call me that, Rich!" Almost like the aftermath of screeching sirens silencing for the first time in forever, the words that Eddie had exclaimed to Richie had reverberated tauntingly throughout his brain. *'Don't call me that, Rich!'* Richie guessed that the words had been permanently engraved into his brain.

Richie had boarded the engine just as it started rolling down the steel railroad tracks in the direction of Indiana, closer, finally, to his brother and his family that he had not seen before in his whole life. He wondered if they would love him. He hoped so.

6. chapter six

RICHIE TOZIER watched half-attentively as what seemed like the entire world blurred passed him as the engine wheeled down the steel railroad tracks, everything outside of the fogged window being clouded in an indistinct muddle of green and gray. He just couldn't believe that he was actually doing this — finally leaving Derry biting his goddamned dust. However, while the town was perhaps the actual definition of shitty, it wasn't completely left in the dust for one reason and one reason only — his friends. All of his happiest memories with his friends took place in that shitty town, though, and was perhaps why he hadn't discarded his memories from there.

Though it was difficult to believe, Richie had never *once* broken a promise to someone, and he wasn't planning on doing it just because he was leaving Derry behind. He had *promised* Eddie that he wouldn't forget him, so he would do just so. Richie wouldn't forget Eddie no matter what. It didn't seem awfully hard considering it was reasonably difficult to forget someone like Eddie Kaspbrak — someone who had been with him through

(*the incident*)

thick and thin.

When he looked outside of the perspired window, he noticed that there were raindrops falling from the heavens — angels shedding tears or whatever the hell that myth was. There were droplets of rain streaming down the windowpane, conjoining with other droplets to form larger beads as they descended further down the glass. It was unusually dark for being barely three o'clock in the afternoon, and he wondered if it was raining back in Derry, too. If it wasn't, then he hoped that his friends were playing with their toy guns in the Kenduskeag or sunbathing by the quarry — doing anything but dragging their feet thanks to Richie's departure.

Richie flipped the package of *Wrigley's Juicy Fruit Gum* over and over in his calloused hands, his thoughts returning back to Eddie Kaspbrak and what happened (or what *could've* happened, rather) back at the train terminal. Richie could've sworn on his life that Eddie Kaspbrak

was planning on kissing him right there in the middle of the crowded train terminal, not caring for a second about the hundreds of people passing by or that their friends were watching. Eddie had looked upward at Richie, moonstruck, with that *look* residing in his expression. Eddie was looking at him with that *look* and, Jesus, it bore so much emotion that it made Richie feel lightheaded. Richie guessed that Eddie not kissing him was for the best, for if he had, then Richie undoubtedly would've fainted right then and there.

Richie Tozier could sense that his palms were sweating, his hands shaking, when the blue-green engine pulled into the train terminal somewhere in Indiana where his family was supposed to meet him. Just the mere thought of seeing his family again brought him great anxiety, though the anxiety wasn't necessarily irrational. He was sure and certain that if anyone was doing what he was doing, they would be an actual nervous wreck, too.

When the engine came to a standstill and the workers pried open the doors, he started feeling like he was going to faint. Shakily, he retrieved his suitcase from where it had been on the bench beside him and stepped off the train and onto the terminal. He glanced this way and that, examining the people that passed by him. He roamed further into the crowded station on unsteady legs, hoping that he had boarded the right train and that he was indeed in Indiana.

But before his thoughts could wander any further, someone called for him. "Richard!"

When he turned to the source of whoever shouted his name, he just about tripped in astonishment. Standing right before his eyes, was who he gathered to be his birth mother. Richie noticed that she honestly didn't look much like him, her chestnut brown hair curled and coiffed, but he did notice that she had the same brown eyes that he had. His mother had who he suspected to be his younger sister perched in her arms, and Richie noticed that she didn't look much like him either, with her bleach blonde hair done up in pigtails and her energetic blue eyes. When Richie glanced to the direct right of his mother, he almost fainted for real, his jaw dropping to what looked to be an alarmingly low level. His *identical* twin brother, Michael, was standing there with shocked, broad eyes. His brother gawked like a

fish out of water, his eyebrows raised in self-evident surprise.

Mike Wheeler looked so much like Richie Tozier that he could've been his actual clone, having the same disarray of raven-colored curls and the same slender figure. His brother had the same of almost *everything*: the same facial structure with the same sunkissed freckles in the same place — the same straight nose and the same arched eyebrows — the same distinctive jawline and the same high cheekbones. There was solely one thing that differed Richie and Mike from each other, and that was the coke-bottle glasses that only Richie wore.

"Holy shit..." Richie mumbled to himself, feeling awfully overwhelmed and lightheaded. "Y-You"—he pointed toward his brother—"have my face!"

"And *you* have mine!" defended Mike, eyebrows furrowed.

"Oh, my God..." stated Richie, louder this time. "I can't believe that there're two of me!"

Holly Wheeler glanced frantically between her brother and the boy that looked like him, totally perplexed as to why there were two of them. *There's another Mike?*

"No, there's two of *me*!"

"I'm pretty sure that there's two of *me*!" declared Richie, being somewhat stubborn. "Not two of *you*! And, you know, I bet that you're my extraterrestrial clone that was dropped onto Earth by creepy fucking martian things like the ones from *E.T.*"

"So you're saying that I'm an... alien?"

"Well, yeah, I mean you've got the voice to match!"

Mike scoffed, rather affronted. "You know our voices sound like *the same*, dipshit!"

"Boys..." said Mrs. Wheeler warningly, eyeing Holly with bothered eyes. "Mind your language!"

"Wow, Mom!" answered Mike, his tone-of-voice dripping with sarcasm and bitterness. "You sounded just like Dad when you said that!"

Mrs. Wheeler looked like she was about to reprimand him for answering in such tone but with one sidelong glance at Richie, who was watching the exchange with raised eyebrows, she was closing her mouth once more. Richie glanced back toward his brother, sending him an inquiring look that translated to: *What the hell just happened?* Mike had returned one that read: *I'll tell you later.* Richie nodded in response.

Mrs. Wheeler looked as if she had wanted to forget about what had just happened with Mike, shrugging off the situation by pulling Richie into an able embrace. Holly was practically squished inbetween her mother and Richie, but she seemed like she didn't mind it all too much. Holly grappled for Richie's forearm and squeezed it tight. Richie let his sister and his mother squeeze him, fairly content in their tender hug.

Richie had noticed that Mike hadn't joined the embrace, peering through the tangle of arms as Mike stood somewhere off to the side, his arms crossed and his jaw locked tight. There was an explicit tension between Mike and his mother — Richie noticed. He hoped that Mike would tell him the reason later like his previous look had promised, for Richie was blatantly confused.

When Mrs. Wheeler freed him from the embrace, his sister had released her clutch on his forearm. Richie noticed that when his mother pulled away, she had tears brimming her eyelids and Richie wondered if he should be crying, too, because he wasn't even close. If anything, Richie wasn't upset to be seeing them — he was happy and he was content. Richie wondered about the story of his upbringing, for he still didn't know the reason for his separation with his brother. Mike knew, however, and that explained the coldness that he showed toward his mother. He would explain everything to Richie when they were alone, perhaps in the middle of the night when everyone in the house was asleep. Maybe Mike would tell Richie about everything that happened the previous year, about what happened to and with Eleven and Will's disappearance and reappearance and Hawkins Labs and the fucking Upside-Down. And Richie, knowing his own fair-

share of trauma, would tell Mike about everything that happened the previous *summer*, about the death of Georgie Denbrough and the horrors of the Neibolt House and Henry-fucking-Bowers and his goons and that satanic, bloodthirsty clown.

In the Wheelers' battered car on the journey back to Hawkins, laughter drifted

(*floated*)

through the air like *that* was where it belonged. There was the occasional bickering between Richie and Mike, but other than that, the two brothers got along reasonably well. Richie and Mike exchanged their interests, which they found out were awfully different. While Mike loved English, Richie loved Math. While Mike played D&D on the regular, Richie knew nothing of the game. While Mike got excited over even the thought of AV Club with Mr. Clarke, Richie had never once touched anything digital other than the telephone and the games at the arcade back in Derry. While Mike loved Star Wars, Richie confessed that he had never seen it. They shared few similar interests, but that didn't discourage them too much. They both *loved* playing video games at the arcade, and they talked for about half an hour about the high scores that they and their friends made. But, of course, Mike loved playing *Dig Dug* and *Dragon's Lair* while Richie loved *Street Fighter* with every bone in his body. Those arcade games were nothing alike!

There were hundreds of other things that Mike wanted to ask Richie, but his mother and his little sister were with them, so he held his tongue while he watched Richie talk animatedly about how his friend called Big Bill had once gotten his clothes stolen during P.E. class. Eventually, they pulled into the driveway of the Wheeler house. Mike noticed immediately to his dismay that his friends were sitting on the sidewalk at the front of his house, their bikes having been discarded somewhere near the basement door. He cursed, realizing that he had forgotten to tell his friends that he was leaving to get Richie from the train terminal and — SHIT! Mike had forgotten to tell them about Richie in the first place! Jesus, he thought that he was one right shitty friend for not telling them the second he found out about it, but he hadn't gotten the chance after locking himself in his room for most of the night. When Saturday morning came, Mike closed himself

in the basement. He spent his Saturday flipping through comic books and planning the next D&D campaign. He ended up falling asleep in the blanket fort, and by the time he woke, it was 7 o'clock on Sunday morning and his mother was beckoning him to church. None of his friends went to his church, so he spent the majority of the service with his arms crossed and his face blank. At around 3 o'clock on Sunday, his mother had promptly dragged him and Holly with her to the train terminal an hour away from Hawkins. Mike thought that everyone was happening all too fast.

Richie noticed the children loitering in front of the house, turning to his brother and asking, "Uh... who're they?"

Mike looked shameful as he glanced at them. "You'll find out soon enough," he answered vaguely.

Mrs. Wheeler had parked the family car in the driveway beside the house, turning around in her seat to unbuckle Holly from where she was snoozing in the backseat. Mike had yanked open the door to the car and stepped out onto the concrete, Richie following behind him. His friends still hadn't noticed that he was home, and Mike took the opportunity to whisper to Richie: "Don't fuck things up, Richie. These are my friends."

"*These nerds* are your friends? Why am I not surprised?" Richie chuckled, though he stayed quiet.

"Yes, *these nerds!* Now, will you shut up?" Mike strolled over to where his friends were sitting as casually as he could, Richie following him from close behind. "Greetings, boys!" he greeted his friends, smiling toothily as they stood to address him. Behind him, Richie snorted in apparent laughter. His friends glanced back at Richie, each with varying emotions on their faces. *So much for being discreet*, thought Mike.

"Er... are you guys seeing another Mike, too? Or am I going absolutely insane?" asked Dustin confusedly, rubbing furiously at his cerulean eyes.

"If you're crazy then so am I..." murmured Will.

"And I am, too..." said Lucas. "Mike, uh, who the hell is *that*?" He gestured toward Richie, eyes squinted in confusion.

Mike had opened his mouth, willing to spill an explanation, but Richie beat him to the chase. "I'm Richie Tozier..." He extended his hand with his introduction, but everyone was far too shocked to respond to it. He dropped his hand since no one had shaken it, but that hadn't lessened his stride. "And I'm good ol' Mikey-Boy's long since lost identical twin brother came all the way from Derry, Maine. Well, I guess, that I came from my mother's vagina, but then again, so did Mike." Will and Dustin exchanged an intrigued glance.

Lucas scowled, turning toward Mike, "Why did you not tell us before about having an identical twin brother, Mike?! Friends don't lie! You know that!" Dustin punched Lucas in the forearm, hard, and Will coughed theatrically. Richie was confused while he glanced inbetween the boys.

Mike Wheeler was no longer smiling like before, glaring instead at Lucas. There was an instantaneous violence behind his eyes, and Richie was almost scared for the friend that his brother was glowering at even though he didn't even know his name.

"Great going, shit-for-brains!" whispered Dustin, speaking out of the side of his mouth.

Lucas' expression was wiped blank, for he realized that he had fucked everything up. He didn't mean to bring up something that reminded Mike of Eleven! It was unintentional! "God, Mike. I'm so sorry. I didn't mean to-"

"Just leave me alone!" exclaimed Mike, bumping Lucas' shoulder as he skirted his friends and walked into the front door. He didn't care if his mother yelled at him, he slammed the front door behind him and sprinted to his bedroom.

"Er... what the hell was that?" demanded Richie, having been abandoned in the wake of Moody Mike.

Lucas sighed, "It was me fucking everything up..."

There was an awkward silence following Lucas' words, and even Richie didn't say anything — these people weren't even *his* friends, they were his brother's and Richie definitely didn't want to fuck anything up with his brother's friends like Mike had asked of him before.

Will extended his hand to Richie, breaking the silence by stating, "Well... I'm Will Byers and this"—he pointed toward the boy with curly dirty-blond hair—"is Dustin Henderson and this"—he pointed toward the dark-skinned boy who had pissed his brother off—"is Lucas Sinclair. 'M sorry you had to meet us like this."

"S okay," responded Richie, shrugging. "I better go check and see if Mike is all right." Will and Lucas exchanged an uncertain look, not knowing if Mike would actually tell his brother about everything that happened last year with Eleven and the Upside-Down — not knowing if Mike would explain the reason for his outburst.

"R-Right..." stated Will, looking anywhere but at Richie. "We hope to see you around."

"Yeah, uh, me too."

Richie opened the front door to the Wheeler house and stepped inside, instantly realizing how he didn't know where the hell Mike went to or where anything in the house was located. It was all foreign to him. He closed the door behind him, looking curiously around the entrance room. "Mike?" called Richie, hoping that he'd either answer or come to him because Richie was flat-out lost in that house.

When he heard footsteps descend the staircase, he figured they belonged to his brother. "Mike?" Instead of his curly-haired brother descending the stairs, it was an excited teenage girl who Richie supposed was his older sister.

"Oh, my God..." she declared. From first glance, Richie thought that she was going to scream 'O.M.G!' when she noticed him, and he was thankful that she hadn't. "You must be Richard."

"It's Richie," he corrected her.

"Richie, right..." she paused, switching the folded clothes she was carrying to her other hand. "I'm Nancy Wheeler. If you needed Mike I'll show you to his room. I heard him come in a few minutes ago."

"Yeah, uh, I should probably see if he's all right. Some shit happened with his friends and I'm dead confused, anyway," confessed Richie. When Nancy turned around as ascended the stairs, he followed her. His sister guided him down the hallway with four doors until she reached the one at the back right, which had an enormous *Star Wars* poster plastered to the door. It definitely belonged to his brother. Richie and Nancy exchanged an apprehensive look before Richie reached out and knocked on the door. Nancy was standing somewhere off to the side, still holding her folded laundry in her arms.

"Mike?" called Richie.

"Richie?" answered Mike, though his voice sounded muffled by something. There was scuffling from behind the door before it was opened by Mike Wheeler himself. In an instant, Mike had grabbed Richie by the wrist and yanked him inside of the bedroom before slamming the door closed. Nancy was heard scoffing from the other side, turning on her heels and walking back down the stairs.

"All right, Mike..." said Richie, turning to confront his brother. "What the actual hell just happened between you and your friends?"

"N-Nothing," answered Mike, strolling across his room and sitting down on the bottom bunk of his bed. Richie trailed behind.

"Bullshit! You were *pissed* at them! Why?" Richie pushed his brother for the answer, for he needed like he belonged here in Hawkins. For fourteen years the secret of his brother had been concealed behind lock and key, kept secret from him by his adoptive mother. He was tired of secrets. He didn't want to keep any secrets from his brother, for his brother had been a secret himself at one time.

"I-I-It's one long and confusing story, Rich. I'm not sure you wanna hear it."

"You know I've got the time," stated Richie, imploring.

"Y-You're right, really..." said Mike. "Listen, what I'm going to tell you *has* to be kept secret from everyone, do you understand?" Richie nodded, confused as to why his brother was being so grave. "If you open your big-ass mouth and let it spill, the government could get involved and-"

"Holy shit, dude! I had no clue you such a *badass!*"

"Whatever you say, Rich..." said Mike, taking an exceptionally deep breath before plunging into the story that he had kept bottled up for what seemed like ages. "Well, it all started when my friends and I were playing Dungeons and Dragons one night..."

7. chapter seven

RICHIE TOZIER listened to his brother explain what happened to his friends and how they battled with the Demogorgon — how with the departure of the creature came the departure of Eleven, who was certainly someone that Mike sincerely cared for. Throughout the entire retelling, uncharacteristically, Richie hadn't opened his mouth but once, deciding that actually listening and processing what his brother revealed was better than jabbering about and understanding nothing at all. He figured that his brother was pleased that he hadn't interrupted him, for he was probably already aware of that fact that Richie seldom stopped talking.

Mike had finished the explanation with the departure of the Demogorgon and, in turn, the departure of Eleven. With the absence of information to explain to Richie, the bedroom descended into silence. Mike supposed that Richie was processing everything that he had revealed, for it would explain his unusual silence. Mike had never completely explained the events of the previous year to anyone before — not even Will, who had found out everything through either Jonathan or Dustin.

"Friends don't lie..." stated Richie, trying the words out for himself. Mike lifted an uncertain eyebrow at his brother. "When Lucas said it, it reminded you of Eleven, didn't it?"

Mike nodded, staring at his clasped hands in which rested on his knees. Richie was sitting beside him on the bottom bunk, watching his brother curiously through his peripheral. "You know, tons of things remind me of her. I know that my friends are careful not to say stuff that has anything to do with her, but any and all words that leave their mouths remind me of her considering she's always there inside of my head."

"Jesus, Mike! You're lovesick!"

Mike scoffed, "I am not! Take it back!"

"Never!" Richie snickered.

"Take it back, Richie!"

"I can't! I can't!" he defended himself. "You said it yourself: Friends. Don't. Lie."

Mike had scowled, giving his brother an unimpressed look that translated to: *Seriously?*

Richie then brandished both of his hands to prove himself innocent, shrugging his shoulders and grinning crookedly.

"So, Rich, didya find any *lurrrve* back Cary?"

"Derry, actually..." he corrected his brother before he continued. "And of course I did! There was this one babe, oh, and she was a *real* catch. Her name was Mrs. K and there only one problem in our relationship — she was my best friends mom!"

Mike furrowed, giving his brother a look that one would give to someone blatantly insane. "Wha-?"

Before Mike had finished his thought, Richie had exploded into an actual *fit* of giggles. He had slipped off the bottom bunk and thudded onto the wooden floor, clutching his stomach while he laughed psychotically. "Your—fucking—face!" he shouted, heaving profound breaths inbetween each word. "I can't—breathe!"

"RICHIE!" Mike, by then, was laughing along with him. "What the actual *hell* is wrong with you?"

"Nuthin' at all, mah good suh!" Richie channeled the infamous British Guy Voice of which Eddie Kaspbrak detested, pointing theatrically at his brother. "What is wron' with yew?"

"That impression was terrible!"

"HEY! You probably couldn't do any better!"

"Well, I can!" defended Mike, crisscrossing his arms across his chest. "Australian or Yoda?"

"Hmm..." Richie stroked his non-existent beard like a classical

mathematician. "Surprise me."

Mike decided that channeling his inner-Yoda was the better choice, making an unusual scrunched-up face while he declared: "Mmmhhh, ready are you? What knows you of ready?"

Richie laughed, "I haven't even seen Star Wars before-

"You should!"

"-and I still thought that that was complete shit!"

"Aww, shut up! I've spent *decades* perfecting my spot-on Yoda impression!"

"Well — sorry to have to break the news to you — but you're gonna need to spend a few more!" Richie chortled, eyes squinting as he laughed.

When Mike had opened his mouth to defend himself against his brother, Mrs. Wheeler chose to summon them from downstairs. "Mike! Richard!"

"Coming!" shouted Mike.

Richie breathed, "It's *Richie*..."

Mike Wheeler pushed himself up from the bottom bunk and padded down the stairs with socked feet, his brother following closely from behind. As they scaled the downstairs hallway, they passed by the blemish on the wall that Mike had made several days before when Susan from Child Safety Services had called his mother. When Richie glanced about, taking (almost) everything in, he didn't notice the blemish on the wall.

When the brothers made their way into the kitchen, the strong aroma of roasted chicken and stringed beans filled their noses. Mike had simply dismissed the large dinner as if it were nothing, but Richie had thought that it was most definitely something. Something amazing! He couldn't remember the last time he had eaten something like this — something so put-together and made with actual *love*. After his adoptive mother had passed, he had ultimately switched to

microwavable dinners or, more often than not, no dinner at all. Before she had died, however, his adoptive mother had made him dinners like this. Richie wasn't sure if those dinners that she cooked were made with love, for the more secrets that he found out about his family, the more he began to realize his adoptive mother had kept from him. Richie, at that moment, was unaware of the real reason behind his early separation with his mother, and maybe if he'd known the whole story would he actually understand the reasons behind his adoptive mother keeping everything hidden from him. While he didn't know much then, he did know that his adoptive mother had still kept the secret of Mike Wheeler away from him. He knew for certain that she had not once told him about his adoption, nor the existence of the Wheeler family. And with the thoughts of his adoptive mother, of course, came the darker and more desolate thoughts of his adoptive father. Richie had shuddered, his mood plummeting from happiness to sadness in a matter of several seconds.

"Wash your hands, boys..." commanded Mrs. Wheeler, pointing toward the kitchen sink. Mike, who knew the workings of the house better than Richie did, scrubbed his hands first, then went on to drying them with some paper towels. While he dried his hands off, he watched his brother closely as he scrubbed and scrubbed and scrubbed at his hands, hard, and started looking rather chafed. While his hands were turning beet-red, his knuckles remained stark-white against his pallid skin. Richie, however, didn't look to care, for he still scrubbed at his hands with an intensity.

"Richie?" Mike called his name, but the calling sounded too far away for Richie to understand. "Richie?" repeated Mike, but still, his brother hadn't shown any signs of response. Mike had placed an inspiring hand on his brother's shoulder, jolting Richie from his trance of some sort. Richie had blinked, his moving hands stopping suddenly. He glanced down at his them, noticing immediately that they were chafed and bleeding in some places. He cursed under his breath, grabbing one of the paper towels beside the kitchen sink and soaking it in the water. He cleaned his bleeding hands with the sodden paper towel, hissing when he struck the more irritated parts.

Mike watched as his brother attempted to clean the blood from his hands, not missing how he hissed and cursed in distress. Instead of

watching him suffer any longer, he grabbed his brother by the wrist, turned off the kitchen sink, told his mother that he would be right back, and dragged him into the hallway bathroom.

"Michael!" Mrs. Wheeler shouted after him, confused.

Mike Wheeler slammed the door behind them and released his brother's wrist, putting down the toilet lid and motioning for him to sit there. Richie complied, watching as Mike reached underneath the bathroom sink and pulled out the hydrogen peroxide and the cotton balls. His brother then uncapped the peroxide and doused some of the cotton balls in it. Richie extended his hands to his brother, who clutched them while he spread the treatment on them. While Mike dabbed the peroxide-dipped cotton onto the agitated skin of his hands, Richie noticed Mike wincing himself — perhaps feeling sorry for his misfortune.

Richie thought of Eddie Kaspbrak while he watched Mike cringe, and for a moment, Mike *was* Eddie — Eddie was treating his hands, wincing while he rubbed on the antiseptic, but when Richie blinked, the image of Eddie was gone and replaced with Mike once again. It felt as if the package of *Wrigley's Juicy Fruit Gum* was burning a hole into the pocket of his jeans.

"What happened out there, Rich?" asked Mike, recapping the bottle of peroxide and grabbing the packet of cotton balls before putting them back under the bathroom sink. "You fucked up your hands pretty bad."

Richie had struggled to remember anything, furrowing his eyebrows in concentration, but still, nothing came to mind. All he could remember was walking into the kitchen with Mike, his mother then telling the boys to wash their hands before dinner. There wasn't much he going on physically, but emotionally his mind had whirled. Richie couldn't remember the reason for his distress, but he remembered how he had felt. "I-I don't really know," he answered. "All I can remember is how I felt — a longing. I don't remember what I wanted, but I knew that I wanted something. I wanted something that I... couldn't have." Then, behaving more like himself, he grinned wickedly. "But who gives jack shit, anyway? It doesn't matter anymore, so just drop it!"

"Right..." stated Mike, wishing that his brother would abandon his oh-boy-everything-is-totally-all-right façade and express his actual damned emotions for once. "We should probably get back to dinner because Mom is probably pissed off because we bolted. Nancy did that once last year and, Jesus, she had an absolute bird!"

Richie's heart swelled with compassion, for Mike hadn't said '*my mom*' like Richie had expected him to, no, Mike had said '*Mom*' while indicating that she was the mother of *both* of them. "Thank you..." he whispered almost inaudibly, sending his brother an appreciative look.

"You're welcome..." responded Mike, beaming in return. He pushed himself up from his haunches, and Richie stood along with him. Mike placed an understanding hand on his shoulder while he guided him into the dining room. Immediately, the aroma of supper reentered their noses.

The Wheeler family was sitting there in the dining room, not having touched their food since their 'special guest' hadn't yet arrived. Mrs. Wheeler had been picking at her fingernails, her eyebrows creased in annoyance as she mumbled something about '*damn teenagers*' and their uselessness. Nancy was flipping through her American History textbook, her bottom lip sucked into her mouth as she scanned the uniform lines of information about some battle on American Indian soils. Holly fiddled with her *Cabbage Patch Kid*, brushing the threaded hair of her doll while she hummed incoherently. Mr. Wheeler, someone who Richie hadn't had the pleasure to meet yet, scowled as he jabbed his roasted chicken with his fork, the look on his face resembling something of someone who wanted desperately to smoke but had restrained himself.

Mike promptly murmured something of an apology, though looking not at all sincere. He had dropped himself into one of the wooden-backed chairs, then pointed Richie toward the one beside him. Richie had claimed the one that Mike had pointed to, sending him an uncertain look as he dropped himself into it.

Richie unfolded his napkin and placed it on his knees, though his attention wasn't necessarily on making the best impression, no, it was to conceal his still-chafed hands from the searching eyes of the rest of his family. While his hands weren't bleeding anymore, they still were

tainted bright pink. Mike caught the drift of what Richie was doing and the reason behind it, choosing to distract his family from his brother for the time being. "Thanks, uh, Mom," he stated, being anything *but* suave. "Dinner looks *great*..." Mike was suddenly overwhelmed with the urge to give his mother his best 'thumbs up' to lighten the mood, but he restrained himself just in time. Richie would have given him complete shit for that later, anyway.

Mike hadn't known Richie for long (only about seven hours, honestly), but he felt as if there was an unspoken connection shared between them through looks alone. Mike knew that Richie had been holding back on telling him about his *life* back in Maine, but Mike hadn't pushed him for information like Richie had done to him. Honestly, Mike thought Richie at least had had the right to be confused after what had happened between Mike and his friends at the front door — he had the complete right to question Mike for the reason behind the '*friends don't lie*' statement. It was partially Lucas' fault, anyway, so his friends couldn't hate him for telling Richie about everything that had happened the previous year in the first place... right? Mike, when the situation was flipped, hadn't felt the absolute need to probe into Richie, for Mike was already aware that there had been some problems with his adoptive family back in Maine. Richie had been abused, and Mike was aware of it thanks to Susan from Child Safety Services.

Mike had been aware that the people who raised Richie in Maine were technically the aunt and the uncle to *both* of them, but Mike couldn't exactly bring himself to call them that after what had happened to Richie that involved them. Mike knew nothing of Maggie Tozier except that she had committed suicide, but he knew of Wentworth because he happened to be the reason Richie was lodged into the hospital in the first place. It was bittersweet, really, for if Wentworth hadn't have beaten Richie on that desolate night, then Richie wouldn't have been shipped all the way to Indiana to reunite with his brother. If Richie hadn't fessed to the nurses that Wentworth was responsible for his injuries, then Richie would be treated at the hospital and immediately sent back to live with his firecracker "father" in Maine.

"I'm glad you two finally decided to join us..." said his mother, her

lips drawn into an inexplicably thin line. Richie had been ashamed that he was the reason for this, blushing furiously as he stared down at his clasped hands. Mike had twitched in irritation, feeling an animosity toward his damned mother bubble somewhere within the pit of his stomach. Mike also had flushed cheeks, the only difference being that *his* were flushed with indignation rather than with embarrassment. He wanted to scream at his mother, but he restrained himself from doing so.

"We're sorry..." he repeated through clenched teeth.

"It won't happen again," reassured Richie, his cheeks still an abnormally intense crimson.

Throughout the entire dinner, words were seldom exchanged. When Richie was asked questions by his parents, they were mainly originated from Mr. Wheeler himself. He answered in simple statements, not elaborating except when needed: 'Nah, I've never really played school sports. I used to play baseball with the kids in my neighborhood, but it wasn't something that I kept with' and 'Yeah, I guess that I'm doing alright in school'.

At first, it was surprising when the difference between the Richie that joked and laughed and sucked at impressions, and the Richie with flickering eyes and prompt replies were compared. Around his parents (at least then), he was the absolute epitome of nervousness. Nancy regarded his behavior but didn't speak of it. Instead, she watched uninterestedly as her father threw poor Richie constant questions about his hobbies and his interests. It was starting to feel like some job interview or something. Nancy thought that the whole dinner was boring as hell, for even the food tasted bland. Richie, however, devoured the meal like it had been his first in years. Nancy could feel her thoughts drifting toward the reality that... maybe it was. He looked skinnier than Mike himself, his slender arms about as round as kitchen sink pipes.

Mr. and Mrs. Wheeler remained oblivious to his uneasiness, still throwing question after question toward their crimson-faced son. Mike had been piqued when his father spewed the second question, scowling as he shoved an ample amount of stringed beans into his

mouth. He had hoped that his mother would notice him shoving the beans into his mouth and reprimand him for it, ultimately easing off of Richie by interrupting the conversation, but she spared him not a single glance. Mike glowered as he swallowed his stringed beans, feeling the tasteless mush descend down his throat.

Mike thought that it was obvious enough how his mother and father skirted around having to explain their reasons for the early separation of him and Richie. Richie himself hadn't noticed it, and even if he had, he hadn't questioned them about it. He wasn't even sure if Mike knew behind the reasoning, so he clamped down on his tongue and swallowed his words whenever they were tempted to overflow.

Both of the brothers had an irritated crinkle furrowing their eyebrows, but Richie was obviously much better at masking it. When his father had asked Richie something or other about school lunches in Maine, Mike snapped — his previous resentment toward his mother resurfacing and ultimately betraying him, forcing his mouth to open and start spewing the words that he wished he had never spoken: "You can't dance around it forever, Mom! Do tell, please, the reason why Richie was shipped half-way across the country in the first place." Everything about his voice screamed ice-cold and bitter, cutting into the atmosphere like a searing knife. "I'm sure he would—"

"Michael!" whisper-yelled his mother, her piercing gaze flickering from Richie to Mike and from Mike to Richie. Mike looked anywhere but at his mother, color flooding into his cheeks.

"Beep-fucking-beep, Mikey..." muttered Richie underneath his breath, and thankfully, earning no one's attention. He himself could sense the tension arise thanks to Mike, he immediately detected the reluctance his parents held toward spilling anything about that topic.

Mrs. Wheeler had opened her mouth to build toward explaining everything, but before she could say anything, an intense *bang!* sounded from outside. Mike started instantly from his wooden-backed chair at the noise, turning on his heels in order to see where the noise originated from. He pulled back the drapes of the dining room, revealing the window of which overlooked the front yard. It was far past sunset, stars having already peered from behind the clouds. He

couldn't see anything outside of the windowpane considering the reflection of the dining room blared onto it. For support, he pulled Richie from his wooden-backed chair, an odd sound of surprise being his response. "What the fuck are you doing?" demanded Richie, his brother dragging him into the front room. "And what is it with you and dragging me places without my consent?"

"Shut the fuck up, Richie!" was his response.

When they passed the full-length mirror, Richie noticed side-by-side the similarities that they shared. But before he could examine them any further, Mike had yanked him away from the reflection. Mike lowered his wrist before he jimmied open the front door, letting in the cool October breeze and the nighttime ambiance. Richie and Mike were standing side-by-side once the door flourished open, their shoulders touching. Mike had furrowed his eyebrows in response to the sight, eyes lingering from spot to spot. The Losers Club, in the flesh, stood before them with varying expressions on their faces, most of them resembling something close to amazement.

Suddenly, before Richie could process what was happening, he had been overcome with an excruciating ripple of nausea. There was an extreme pounding in his head louder than anything he had ever heard in his entire life, and he soon recognized the sound to be his own heartbeat.

Thump Thump. Thump Thump.

Richie swallowed. His entire world was suddenly fast-paced — everything was happening one thing after the other. He tottered uncertainly on unsteady limbs, his eyelids flickering open and closed. He fainted, having succumbed to the darkness. Before Richie could collapse onto the ground, however, Mike had responded. He gasped, reaching promptly forward and grabbing his brother from his armpits before he could reach the wooden floor.

8. chapter eight

Mike Hanlon will be referred to by his full name, while Mike Wheeler will be referred to as 'Mike' or 'Wheeler' when needed. Just remember, if you see the name 'Mike' by itself, it indicates Mike Wheeler is the subject.

RICHIE TOZIERS eyelids fluttered, his pupils dilating in accordance with the darkness that surrounded him. Groaning, he kneaded his temples, thinking to himself groggily, 'Where the hell am I?' He worked his throbbing muscles as he pushed himself into an upright position, rubbing his reeling eyes from underneath his coke-bottle glasses. He straightened his tortoise-shelled glasses as he glanced about. Richie was alarmed at what he could see — or what he couldn't see, rather — because surrounding him was three-hundred and sixty degrees of absolute darkness. He furrowed, pushing himself back onto his feet. Richie was startled when he glanced down at his sneakers of which were enveloped by roughly four inches of water. If it was even possible, he was even more startled when he checked the seat of his trousers and realized that they were about as dry as bones.

Richie swallowed, terror beginning to slither out of the crevices in his brain. "Hello?" he called into the abyss, his voice resounding for several seconds. "Is anyone there? Mike?"

Nothing.

"Mike? Are you there? Mike?" he screamed, his voice becoming more and more desperate as the seconds ticked by. Richie knew not the reason why he was calling for his brother and not anyone else, but he guessed it had something to do with the connection that they shared. Or, more realistically, it was because Mike was the last person that Richie remembered hearing. He thought that perhaps Mike was there with him — somewhere in the fucking abyss. Had whoever snatched Richie and brought him here brought Mike with him? Richie was unsure of almost everything.

Suddenly, it hit him. He was overwhelmed with the terrible, awful feeling that something horrible was going to happen, so strong and dense on his chest that it restricted his breathing and caused him to

wheeze. He coughed, teetering from side-to-side and somehow, not managing to collapse as he whirled around. It was as if

(his father)

someone had punched him in the chest, knocking the wind out of him, and he wondered if maybe Henry Bowers had been the one that snatched him and brought him here, but then, he remembered that the last place he remembered being was Hawkins — someplace far, far away from Henry Bowers and his lackeys.

"Mike!" he screamed out, spinning around in a continuous circle.
"Mike!"

"M-Mike?" It was another voice, sounding much more feminine and delicate. Richie whirled around in the direction of the voice, screaming in surprise when the origin of the voice came into his peripheral. It was an unmistakably delicate and slender girl who looked anything but harmless in appearance, but Richie had screamed nonetheless at the weird proximity that she had on him. They had been nose-to-nose, close enough to where he could see the golden flecks in her irises. Richie reacted, jumping backward in an awkward blur of limbs. "Why are you screaming your own name?"

"I'm not Mike..." Richie explained, pointing at himself. He had gawked broad-eyed at her, confused more than anything else. "Where the hell are we? And who are you?"

"Not Mike?" she pressed, her chestnut-brown hair swishing as she tilted her head to the side.

"Yes! Not Mike! I'm Richie! Richie Tozier!" Richie was horrible at volume-control, so he ended up unintentionally yelling at her.
"Who're you!?"

"Eleven." Richie almost slapped himself across the forehead in realization. This was Eleven! Mikes Eleven!

"You're Eleven?" Richie urged for affirmation, just in case he hadn't heard her correctly. Eleven nodded her head once, her energetic hair bobbing. "So you have telekinetic powers?"

Eleven had been confused as to how he knew this information about her, but she once more nodded nonetheless. "Why do you have Mike's face?"

"We're twins..."

"What are twins?"

"Twins are two children who were born on the same day by the same mother. Mike and I are identical twins, meaning that we look alike."

Eleven had opened her mouth, prepared to question Richie further about Mike, but was forced to close her mouth once more at the next sound. There had been sadistic laughter blossoming from every which way, encompassing the extraordinary duo. Richie started, spinning around to locate the direction of which the laughter had originated from. Eleven was doing the same, confusion the predominant expression on her careful features.

"BEEP BEEP, RICHIE! BEEP BEEP, RICHIE! BEEP BEEP, RICHIE!" It was another voice, and this time, one that Richie knew all-too-well. It sent electricity down his spine, terror resurfacing and palms sweating. There was an unusual prickling inside of the jagged scar on his hand, making him nauseous.

"What is that?" Eleven sounded somewhat scared, but Richie could not for the life of him bring himself to tell her what that was. "Richie? What is that?"

And before either of them could respond, an intense pop! sounded from somewhere in front of them. Pennywise the Dancing Clown was standing only several feet ahead of them, looming over them with an eerie smile.

Eleven squeaked, glancing from the clown to the bespectacled boy that looked so like her Mike. Richie, however, had jumped backward, letting out an unexpected lament as he looked up at the imminent creature.

It towered over them with an improbable smile that stretched from all the way from its jawbone to right underneath its golden eyes.

There were several cracks in its cranium, presumably from where the Losers had opposed it down in the sewers underneath Derry, Maine. There was still the orange tuft of hair that sprouted from the back of its head, and there was still the fuzzy, orange buttons that ran down the front of the suit that It wore, but there was something different about the clown that Richie battled back in Derry and the clown that was facing him now. He looked down suddenly toward the jagged scar on his right hand, for he could feel it pulsing with an electricity that he could not place.

"Rich Wheeler-Tozier and Plain Jane Hopper" — Eleven furrowed her eyebrows. Who is Jane? — "What a nice, tasty snack! It is too bad that I am harmless in the Void, but you should know, Rich, that I will be coming for you and your little friends! I have not forgotten about your brother and the Byers boy, either, for they are the two that I am most looking forward to feasting on!" Pennywise had cackled once finished, sounding so much more intimidating than before that it invoked Richie to tremble in alarm.

"You should've stayed in Derry, Richie! You should've never left!" Pennywise had continued, the jutting teeth that It had dribbling grotesquely with piss-and-shit-water-smelling saliva.

And before Richie knew what was happening, It had lurched forward — jingling clown bells sounding with the swift movement — and seized him around the throat. It boosted him several feet above the shallow water, letting the bespectacled child strain in mid-air. Richie fought against the grasp that It had around his throat, for the absence of breath to his system was turning his face an unpleasant blue color, but It had remained ruthless and determined. It breathed the atrocious stench of death onto Richies face, provoking him to fight even harder to be released.

Eleven reacted, extending her hand toward Pennywise as she channeled her telekinetic powers. It was thrown backward in one direction, flipping in mid-air before regaining balance. It crouched low, growling. Richie was thrown in the other direction, letting out an uncharacteristic shriek as he landed painfully on his ass. How graceful, he thought.

"NO..." Eleven commanded, glaring at the goddamned clown with

such an enthusiasm. There was crimson blood streaming down from her nostrils and the veins in her forehead were clear against her pallid complexion, but she was smirking to herself and Richie thought that this chick was totally badass. Eleven could do that?

But before Richie could vocalize his thoughts, everything around him started to disappear. Pennywise had evaporated into nothing. It looked at Richie while it faded, the ominous look that it had frightening Richie to the core. Eleven disappeared after Pennywise, leaving Richie alone once more in the void of nothingness. He figured that perhaps this whole thing had been some fucked-up dream since people couldn't really disappear in an astonishing flurry whenever they pleased. Before Richie could think everything over, however, his eyelids had been slammed closed against his will.

Richie opened his eyelids, grimacing due to the aggressive light of the entrance room that gleamed into his face. He blinked several times, attempting to clear his eyesight. There were faces in his, and he had panicked for an exact second before he realized that Eddie Kaspbrak was crouched before him with an alarmed expression painted across his features.

Richie Tozier knew of solely two things at that moment: 1) his cheek burned like a bitch, and 2) Eddie Kaspbrak has pretty fucking eyes.

"Richie!" Eddie shouted, speaking loud as his slender hands found both sides of his friend's face. He was not being particularly gentle as he examined Richie's cheeks, scrutinizing. Richie winced as Eddie prodded at his burning cheek, for he could faintly remember his father striking him there several days ago, but Eddie took no notice since he was far too worried over Richie's emotional state. "Can you hear me? Can you see me? Are you alright? How many fingers am I holding up?" Eddie released Richie's face, holding up seven fingers and waving them in the air.

"Yes, dipshit! And seven!" answered Richie, glimpsing upward at the other faces that loomed above him. Bill, Stanley, Beverly, Ben, Mike Hanlon, and Mike Wheeler stared down at him with concern on their faces. "What the fuck happened? And why are you guys here?"

"Hell if we knew!" declared Stanley.

Bill affirmed, "Thuh-That's what we wuh-wanna know!"

"We should take this downstairs before my mother flips her shit," remarked Mike Wheeler, being always the voice of reason. He extended his hand toward his brother, who grasped it and allowed himself to be hauled back onto his feet.

Wheeler directed everyone through the house, down the basement stairs, and into the basement. Mike Hanlon, Bill, and Stanley crammed themselves onto the oddly-patterned couch while Beverly and Ben sat cross-legged on the carpet. Wheeler, Eddie, and Richie dropped themselves into the chairs positioned around the wooden table that was ordinarily used for D&D campaigns.

"Come now, Billiam, do tell Mike and I how and why the fuck you losers came here," pronounced Richie, hoping and praying that he could deter the subject from his dream (?) in the Void for as long as possible.

"I-I'm not so sure about either of thuh-those, Rich..." answered Bill, locking eyes with the aforementioned. "All I k-k-know is that we wuh-were chased by Buh-Bowers, Criss, and Huggins into thuh-thuh-the forest back in Derry and were looking for someplace to hide because Bowers was holding his suh-suh-switchblade. Wuh-we climbed into an opening in one of the tree-trunks because it was big enough to fuh-fit each of us and we ended up huh-here on your front lawn half-way across the cuh-country."

Mike understood the names 'Bowers, Criss, and Huggins' considering that they were implied to be the bullies of his brother and his friends.

"Did you see anything when you were inside of that tree? Were there specks floating around the air? Was everything blue? Did you, by any chance, see a girl in there?" Mike had so many questions. Had they actually traveled through The Upside Down like something inside of him told him? Had they seen Eleven? He was conscious of what happened to Nancy the previous year, how she had entered The Upside Down through the trunk of a tree when she was searching for Barb. Had this happened his brothers friends? Had it somehow

malfunctioned and sent them all the way to Hawkins?

"We didn't see much," supplied Stanley, his foot bouncing — once, twice, thrice, once, twice, thrice, once, twice, thrice — before he continued: "I squished myself into the trunk of that tree and then I saw an immediate flicker of blue, then red before I ended up piled on your front lawn."

"Same with me..." Beverly.

"Me too..." Ben.

Mike and Richie exchanged an expressive look. "The Upside Down..." The Losers, both Mike and Richie knew, had been through The Upside Down to connect them to Hawkins as they escaped from something as human as school bullies.

"The Upside Down?" inquired Beverly, having overheard Mike. "What does that mean?"

"That's one helluva story, but it's for another time," returned Wheeler, sounding as if he wanted nothing more and nothing less than to not have to re-explain the events of the previous year. Beverly nodded in understanding.

Richie was starting to feel rather selfish, for he was self-centered enough to keep everything that had happened in his dream (?) of the Void to himself for this long. He wanted to tell Mike that he had seen Eleven the second that he awoke, but he hadn't brought himself to, considering that the arrival of his friends was more at-hand. But then, of course, he remembered Pennywise and he remembered the jagged scar on his right hand.

"All right, I can't hold it in any longer! Mike!" — Richie locked eyes with the aforementioned, who looked back with furrowed eyebrows — "I saw Eleven!"

"Y-You... what?" Mike couldn't have cared less that the Losers were present, all he cared about was El.

"Eleven! I saw her!" he confessed, his throat starting to constrict with emotion. "In the dark place with the water! Buh-But I also saw

something else..." he trailed off.

"What, Rich?" questioned Eddie, his voice delicate. "What did you see?"

"It..." confessed Richie. Mike lifted an eyebrow, for he knew nothing of an It. "I-I saw It."

"What do you mean you saw It? It's dead! We killed It!" stated Stanley, sounding certain as his voice sounded intense. "It's dead..."

"But it isn't!" insisted Richie, the level of his tone increasing. "When I fainted I saw It! Just like Eleven sees things!"

"You were dreaming, Richie!"

Wheeler had been through enough of this incessant bickering, especially since he had no clue who It was. "All right! All right! What the fuck is It?" When talked like that, he sounded so much like Richie that even Richie noticed it.

"What you fear the most..." supplied Mike Hanlon, sounding rather vague.

"What?" Wheeler was confused.

"It is a demon clown—" continued Beverly.

"—who eats chuh-children—" added Bill.

"—and makes your worst nightmare a reality," remarked Ben.

"I... what?" demanded Wheeler.

"We fought It back in Derry..." asserted Richie.

"Fuh-Fought?"

"Yes! Fought, dumbass!"

"Wuh-Wait... is Eleven all right? You said that you saw her in the same place you saw It."

"Yeah, she's fine. Better than fine, actually. When I was being attacked by Pennywise" — there was a collective shudder among the Losers — "she used her mind powers and saved me!"

Mike, like before, couldn't have cared less that Richie had just spilled almost everything that El was branded for. "You said you saw her in the dark place... right?" Richie nodded in affirmation. "That means she isn't dead! That means that she isn't in The Upside Down!"

"Yeah, so...?"

"That means, dumbass, that she's somewhere in The Right-Side Up! That means that we can find her!" Mike was exhilarated with his epiphany, practically bouncing off the walls. Wheeler was beaming, which was something that he didn't do very often.

9. chapter nine

RICHIE TOZIER responded with an annoyed, "Woah, woah, woah!" as he moved his hands to indicate slowing something down. "Slow your fucking roll, Sherlock Holmes! Finding Eleven is probably not as easy as you think it'll be!"

"Looking around for her is better than just sitting here and waiting for her to find me!" riposted Wheeler, rather defensive. He flushed with crimson, an apparent irritation showing in the irises that looked so much like Richies. "Did she say anything to you? Anything about how we can find her?"

"Nah, she didn't," said Richie. "We were pretty distracted, y'know, considering there was this psychotic killer clown with us, too." — Stanley squeezed his eyes closed, sinking further into the oddly-patterned couch. — "But she had thought that I was you when she first saw me and I had to explain to her that we were twin brothers."

Mike looked overwhelmed, to say the least, rubbing his temples as he studied Richies expression. Mike wished that he could've been there, could've seen Eleven another time. If he were being honest with himself, he was jealous of his brother for seeing Eleven. Richie didn't even *know* Eleven, only knowing *of* her. Mike didn't know why the Big Man in Charge had shown Richie to Eleven and not himself. Mike was the one who had taken El in when she needed someone the most, not *Richie!* He wanted to ask Richie to describe what she looked like. Mike hadn't seen Eleven in almost a year, and she was bound to have changed in that prolonged amount of time, but what Mike asked instead was: "What did this *It* do, anyway?"

"It said something about you and this 'Byers' character, who I guess is Will, and that it looks forward to 'feasting on' you... whatever that means," Richie explained, using air quotations around several of the words. "It told me that I should've stayed in Derry, then I-It... grabbed me around the throat. Eleven saved me after that when she used her fucking gnarly powers to save my useless ass." Richie cracked his best crooked smile, crisscrossing his arms across his chest. "After that, everyone started to disintegrate and the next thing I know I'm face-to-face with the prettiest girl alive: Eddie Kaspbrak!"

Eddie produced an unimpressed scowl, the redness of his cheeks progressing no matter how much he sought to control it. He then used one of the phrases that he had become programmed to use whenever his trash-mouthed friend let his mouth run too much: "Shut the fuck up, Richie!"

"You know you love me, Eds!" Richie was messing around with him — Eddie was sure of it.

"I don't, dipshit! And I don't love it when you call me 'Eds' either!" Man, he hated it when Richie called him Eds... but he sort of liked it, too.

"All right! Break it up, ladies!" interrupted Stanley, having belatedly entered the conversation. It was surprising that Stanley had spoken in the first place, what, after everything that had happened between Richie and It, but he had spoken nonetheless. "We have much more important issues at hand!"

Richie channeled his Irish Cop Voice (though it sounded more like his Pirate Frank Voice), practically bursting with energy. "Okey, okey, m'boy! Don't git yer panties in a twist!" Stanley bristled, his left eye twitching in annoyance. "Aye am sure that my good ol' broder doesn't cayre! Right, Mikey?"

Mike looked at him, his annoyed look translating to 'Are you sure about that?' Richie beeped, sealing his mouth closed for the time being.

Beverly glimpsed at Wheeler once the room fell into silence, "While we're on the topic of caring... who the hell is Eleven?"

"Someone from a long time ago—"

Richie interrupted, not being one to tarry in the silence for too long, "Yeah! Someone with badass telekinetic powers that Mike was probably *all over* from what I hear!" He raised his voice several octaves, apparently imitating Mike, though the brothers sounded almost the same, "*Oh, Eleven! You saved us! You saved me!*" Richie theatrically blew an imitated kiss with an obnoxious smooching sound ('Muah!'), deliberately directing the fake kiss toward Eddie,

who colored even more than already... if that was even possible.

Mike clenched and unclenched his fists before he spoke, his voice both piercing and bitter. "Shut up, Richie! Do you even know what the hell you're saying half the time?!" Richies expression flashed with guilt, and he instantly regretted even opening his mouth in the first place. He had heard the story of Eleven and Mike and Will and the Demogorgon just several hours ago and he knew close to nothing about Eleven and Mike... so why had he picked fun at his brother when his brother was so blatantly touchy on the subject? He blamed the nonexistent filter over his mouth. *Beep beep, Richie!* he thought. He knew that needed to backtrack, to apologize for his stupid mouth.

"I say what I think even if what I think is dirty and wrong..." admitted Richie, suddenly feeling 10x smaller than he had before. He avoided eye-contact with everyone in the basement, choosing to look at his intertwined hands rather than the scrutinizing stares of his friends and his brother. "I'm sorry I messed with you about Eleven. It was the wrong thing to do." It was extraordinary how Richie could go from Beep-Beep-Your-Mom-Cute-Cute-Cute Richie to Sincere-and-Concerned-and-Nothing-Like-Richie Richie in just a matter of seconds.

"It's okay, Rich..." affirmed Mike, his previous irritation withdrawn. "I understand." But Mike didn't understand, his mouth didn't run too much like Richies did. When he sensed anything negative, he closed his mouth immediately. Richie, however, knew not the right times to keep quiet. Instead, he blabbed on about this and that, not even comprehending the words that escaped his mouth.

Beverly admitted, "I don't wanna ruin this moment, but I think that we're all still confused..." And she gestured toward the rest of the Losers with her eyebrows knitted, her pinkish lips pursed.

Mike grabbed the reins, just like before. "Right, well... it all started when my friends and I were playing Dungeons and Dragons one night..."

"And she just... disappeared?!" exploded Ben, standing up from his position on the floor in an indignant flurry. "Just like that?!" He

snapped his fingers to symbolize something fast, earning an unsettled bob of the head from Wheeler. "That's the worst fucking thing I've ever heard!"

"Jay-sus!" declared Richie, grinning from ear-to-ear. "That has gotta be the first time I've heard anything foul out of Ol' Benny-Boys mouth! Congrats, brotha!"

"Did everything turn out all right? Is Will okay? Finish the story, Wheeler!" Ben demanded, practically bursting with anticipation.

"Yeah, most of us turned out all right..." he answered, feeling rather uncomfortable being the source of all the attention. "Miss Byers and Chief Hopper found Will in The Upside-Down and brought him back here. He spent some time in the hospital, though, but he is as all right as he can be. I just saw him earlier, anyway..." *Shit!* He had almost forgotten about seeing his friends earlier, and all the memories starting flooding back before he could stop them. He had screamed at Lucas for saying something touchy about Eleven while Dustin and Will watched with fearful eyes. Mike sometimes hated the fact that his temper could be tested so easily. He suddenly jumped out of his chair and skipped up the basement stairs, his destination being the telephone on the wall beside the main staircase. "Mike?" called Richie, but chose not to actually chase him. "What are you doing?" There was no answer.

Mike lifted the telephone off of the receiver, dialed the number of the Sinclair house, and waited. He swallowed, wrapping the telephone cord around his index finger as he listened to the monotonous beeping of the dial tone. When the beeping stopped midway, the worried voice of Lucas Sinclair traveled through the phone. "If this is you, Dustin, go piss up a rope or something!"

Mike cleared his throat, blinking several times before answering: "Uh, not Dustin..."

"Mike?" Lucas sounded like he couldn't believe it, for he was close enough to know just how long Mike Wheeler could stay mad at someone, and this way far too early. "God, I feel so *stupid!* I'm sorry about what I said earlier! It was stupid and out of line and I shouldn't have said anything!"

"S okay, Lucas. I wanted to apologize, too. I should be able to handle someone mentioning Eleven by now. I mean, I survived math and everything." Mike attempted to joke around, but Lucas didn't think it was funny. Mike shook his head, remembering one of the reasons he called Lucas in the first place. "Anyway, I need you to call Dustin and Will and tell them that they absolutely need to come over right now. Tell 'em to sneak through the basement door and be real quiet. I need you to convince Will to sneak out of the house or really, really convince his mother since his curfew ended at 6. And hurry! It's really freaking important!" Before Lucas could protest at all, Mike slammed the telephone back on the receiver with an audible *click!*

"Michael!" He muttered curses underneath his breath at the sound of his mothers voice. He looked toward the basement stairs where he could hear the quiet murmurs of his brother and his brothers friends, then he looked toward the dining room where he knew that his mother, his father, and his sisters were sat. Mike made an agitated snap decision, sprinting under the archway between where his family was eating and the kitchen. He clutched the finished sides of the archway as he exclaimed: "Great dinner! Some of, uh, my friends are coming over! Thanks, mommy!" Mike couldn't remember the last time he actually called his mother 'mommy' but he knew that it was years ago. "Wha-?" his mother stopped herself, an apparent spike to her tone. "Michael!" He ignored it, pushing himself off the archway before practically flying down the basement stairs.

Ted Wheeler had about enough of Mikes antics, scowling as he lifted himself from his wooden-backed chair. Mrs. Wheeler sent her husband an authentically stern look, sending him back into the chair with furrowed eyebrows. It was obvious that Mrs. Wheeler was still walking on shards of glass around Mike, for she would usually chase after Mike herself when he behaved like this. Instead, she folded her napkin onto her knees and booped an oblivious Holly on the nose. Nancy just about fell out of her seat in astonishment, suddenly jealous that Mike could do whatever he wanted now and not get into much trouble. But she guessed that everything was fair. Mike hadn't once been told of the existence of Richie Tozier, so Nancy guessed that he had the perfect right to be upset at his mother for keeping it from him. Mrs. Wheeler also had the right to feel guilty.

Mike was startled, for the volume in the basement was loud — almost too loud. Everything was tense.

Bill Denbrough stood straight, glaring contempt flashing behind his captivating eyes. He clenched and unclenched his fists several times, displacing his body-weight between his legs. Richie Tozier was the unfortunate victim of the scowl that Bill wore, but he didn't seem at all bothered. Richie looked several colors redder than before, his gaunt arms crisscrossed across his midsection as he balanced with one of his legs to the side. Eddie Kaspbrak was stood inbetween the two of them, hands pressed against their chests as if to separate them. He signified the peacemaker of the unfavorable situation, his soft irises and innocent expression pleading that Richie and Bill stop their fighting, but to no such avail. Bill and Richie had been friends the longest out of all of the Losers, having become friends themselves at the beginning of their preschool years, and were best friends despite everything. They didn't fight often,

("YOU'RE A BUNCH OF LOSERS AND YOU'LL GET YOURSELF KILLED TRYING TO KILL THAT FUCKING STUPID CLOWN!")

but when they did, it got pretty messy.

"—wuh-wasn't like we chuh-chose to come here, Ruh-Richie!" As if timed perfectly, Bill finished the second that Wheeler jumped the last carpeted step of the basement staircase.

"Oh, so you were just gonna stay in Cary forever?! You were just gonna leave me here?!" riposted Richie, speaking loud. "What if my brother was Freddy Krueger or something? Would you have stayed in Cary if you had the choice?! Would you even give jack shit?!"

Mike furrowed... *Cary?*

In his bedroom earlier when he had called Richies hometown 'Cary' on accident, Richie had corrected him — saying that, no, his hometown was called Derry, not Cary. *'Well, why had Richie just now called Derry... Cary?'* thought Mike. He thought that perhaps one of Richies friends would say something to him about his mistake, but no one said anything of the sort. Mike assumed that maybe Richie really was from Cary, for none of Richies friends said anything about it.

'Note to self,' Mike thought. *'Search for Cary, Maine in the archives.'*

"Of cuh-cuh-course, we would've come for you! Wuh-We wouldn't wanna leave you fuh-for dead! If wuh-we heard that something happened to yuh-you, we wouldn't came as fast as we could — even if was is all the way from Cary!"

Derry? Cary? Mike was still confused.

There was an indistinct undertone to his right-hand side: "What?" It was Mike Hanlon.

Hanlon lifted an eyebrow in confusion, and Wheeler realized then that Mike Hanlon was the only person in the room that looked confused. Could Mike Hanlon confirm that the Losers were from Derry, not Cary? Wheeler had opened his mouth to question Hanlon about it, but Eddie had started talking.

"Would you two ladies stop fighting?!" Eddies voice was much more high-pitched than that of anyone else, gaining the attention of everyone. "I've had just about enough of this! We get it, all right?! Losers 'till the end! So stop being so goddamned self-deprecating, Richie!"

Eddie had beeped Richie, for the basement had descended into silence. Eddie had called out Richie for his façade in front of everyone, though everyone was conscious of his 'no-negative-emotions' policy, and had rendered the Trashmouth speechless.

Will, Lucas, and Dustin chose that particular moment to enter the basement.

"What did we miss?" Dustin.

"Hey, Richie!" Will.

"Who the fuck are these people?" Lucas.

10. chapter ten

THE LOSERS (sans Richie) stared confusedly at these newfound arrivals. Eddie, whose hands were still pressed carefully against both Bill and Richies chests, turned toward them, sucking half-attentively on his plump lips. Will, Lucas, and Dustin wore their own personal looks of utter confusion, having never been introduced to these random kids in *Mikes basement* .

Richie hurried to provide whatever clarity he could to the situation, *way* more excited than he should've been to do such thing. "Will, Dustin, Lucas: these are *my* friends..." He pointed to indicate who each of Mikes friends were, and did the same for his own, "There's Mike Hanlon, Bill, Ben, Stanley, Beverly, and Eds.

Eddie scowled, somewhat vexed as he let his hands fall back to his sides, "It's *Eddie* , not Eds."

"Well then, what are you guys doing here? I thought you lived in Maine or something?" Lucas asked them, his expression providing insight to his perplexed state regarding this rather... unusual situation.

"We duh-don't really know, to buh-be completely honest..." Bill, forever the leader of the Losers Club, took to answering. "Wuh-We somehow ended up here after having cluh-climbed into a tree due to a run-in with suh-some bullies back home."

In faux-nonchalance, his tone *dripping* with potent sarcasm, as sweet as honey, Wheeler added, "Oh! And all that was thanks to the good-old Upside-Down..."

Will blinked. "What?" He demanded, alarmed. "That couldn't have happened, could it? How? From *Maine* ?" Dustin set his hand on Will's shoulder in an ill-fated attempt to show comfort.

At this, Mike softened, a newfound solemnity in the crinkle of his brows and the downward turn of his lips. He continued in an undertone, "Richie saw Eleven in the Dark Place, too. In the place with the water."

Will, Dustin, and Lucas wore almost identical looks of shock and confusion, having not expected this return of Eleven one bit. With knit brows, Dustin said, "You mean... in the Bathtub?" The Losers found this alienated name foreign to their usual language and out-of-place in the sentence, but said nothing of it.

Mike nodded. "He saw something else, too. Something he and friends called It."

Looking confused, Lucas asked, "What's an *It* ?"

"It's some *one* and It's some *thing* — a monster..." Mike Hanlon answered, tone sinister. He finished his explanation reluctantly, having had to gather a considerable amount of courage to do so, "A clown..."

"Wait..." Dustin frowned, brows drawn. "A *clown* ?"

Richie somehow found it in himself to answer, "Yeah, a—

(*why rich? what are you afraid of?*)

—clown."

A collective shiver that ran through the room at Richie's affirmation, affecting even those who had never encountered It. The mere thought of a monstrous clown was terrifying in itself.

"That cluh-clown killed my luh-little brother..." Bill admitted suddenly. "It cuh-can shapeshift and it's duh-duh-demonic. We thuh-thought we killed It buh-back at home, but we duh-didn't. Somehow, It cuh-came back, and It came buh-back early."

"Early? What do mean *early* ?" Mike asked.

"It's *supposed* to come back every twenty-seven years," Ben allowed, idly tapping his thumbs against his crossed legs. "We made a blood pact to come back to home if It ever came back. It did, but we didn't know it. *It* took us here, I think. To Richie."

Richie smiled crookedly. "Ben, I'm not anything special! There's no need to thin—"

Ben cut him off, "That's not what I meant, Richie. I meant that we're supposed to be together. The Lucky... Seven?" He looked around at the others — at the Losers and eventually, at Mike's friends. He wondered distantly if *Mike's* friends had anything to do with them being in Hawkins. Could they also be It's targets?

"What are you thinking, Ben?" Bev asked from beside him, immediately recognizing the pensive look on his round face.

"I think... that It doesn't only want *us*... " Ben remarked slowly, thoughtfully. "I think that It wants more children and I think that since Richie... who was already a target... became affiliated with more kids and reunited with Mike... that It wants them, too."

"So, it *isn't* the Lucky Seven anymore..." Eddie observed. He watched Bill carefully from across the room, waiting for *some* kind of reaction to all of this. When there was none, he continued, "...It's the Lucky *Eleven* ."

Mike flinched a little, but said nothing. Eddie noticed that his words had had some kind of an effect on Mike, for he knew distantly of the girl with 'badass telekinetic powers' as Richie had described it. He knew that Eleven and Mike had had some kind of... relationship from how Richie had mimicked Mike and his indicated obsession with her, but he knew nothing else of her besides her peculiar name. Richie must've known more about Eleven.

The other Losers also seemed to make this connection between the population of their combined groups and the girl with 'badass telekinetic powers' that Richie had seen shortly after he had fainted.

In an attempt to placate him, Richie set his hand softly onto his brothers shoulders.

At this touch, Mike looked over at his brother, wide-eyed for a short-lived moment, almost like he had *just* realized that he was there in the first place. Then, his foul expression dissolved and was soon replaced with a look of thankfulness. He let his hand fall, looked over at his friends, and asked, his tone earnest, "What are our parents going to say? These random kids from Maine just... showed up on our front lawn? We can't tell them that! Or, at least, I can't tell *my*

parents."

"How about everyone stays at my house?" Will proposed off-handedly. "Mom has been through a lot regarding the... extraordinary, so this won't be more of a surprise than it is confusion."

Mike admitted, rather forlorn at the reality of his statement, "It's better than here. I have to smooth things over with my mom first, and I can't guarantee she'll let me and Richie stay over there considering that it's Richie's first night here. She seemed pretty dead-set on getting Richie to like her, though, so she might let us if *Richie's* able to convince her..."

All of a sudden, he remembered what had happened at the dinner table — how his temper had gotten the better of him; how his mother had almost fessed of separating them at birth. Mike seethed at the mere thought of what his mother had done to him and Richie and how cruel it had been, and, though his irritation was visible, no one said anything regarding it, having easily assumed that there was a newfound bad blood there.

"Your mom could *never* say 'no' to this face..." Richie smiled ridiculously, clearing having exaggerated it. He stuck his lower-jaw out so far forward that he looked to have a terrible overbite. In truth, he looked like a demented, rabid bulldog.

While Dustin, Bev, Lucas, Ben, Eddie, and Mike Hanlon laughed at this, Mike frowned. His brows knit, he corrected his brother, tone somewhat forceful, " *Our* mom, Richie..."

Richie blinked, having trashed his ridiculous face. "Sorry... *our* mom," Richie muttered softly, freckled cheeks turning crimson. Even Will, Lucas, and Dustin, who had only known Richie for so long, knew that this seldom occurred — Richie doing *anything and all* quietly.

"Well, we'll have to walk over there..." Lucas said suddenly, breaking the prolonged silence. "We don't enough bikes for *six* extra people."

"Can we leave our bikes here, Mike?" Dustin asked as he straightened

the hat on his head. "So we don't have to walk them."

"Yeah, I don't care..." Mike said off-handedly. He then turned to his brother and continued, "C'mon, Rich. We have to convince Mom to let us spend the night. We'll deal with all this Upside-Down *shit* tomorrow."

Richie nodded his compliance. The words 'Mom' and their unfamiliarity still made him feel rather overwhelmed, but he pushed the thought under the carpet, and followed his brother as he scaled the basement staircase. Dustin, Lucas, Will, and the rest of the Losers started toward Wills house.

Will took the rucksack off of his shoulders and fished out a torch. He turned it on, letting it guide them through the semi-darkness.